A nightmare journey into the blackest pits of horror . . .

Succubus

JOHN STOCKHOLM

SPHERE

HIS EYES WERE POOLS OF VIOLET QUICKSAND SUCKING HER SOUL INTO THEIR DEPTHS . . .

'What are you?' she asked weakly. 'What in God's name *are* you?'

Daniel straightened up, still staring down at her, still smiling.

As Lucy watched, in growing horror, so the smile began to change . . .

'Watch me,' he said. 'Watch me closely. Because I shall make it impossible for you to tell anyone what you see. Watch me, Lucy.'

She watched him. And in the silent dawn her slowly rising wail of horror was like a siren call of warning.

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JOHN STOCKHOLM

SPHERE BOOKS LIMITED
London and Sydney

First published in Great Britain by
Sphere Books Ltd 1985
30–32 Gray's Inn Road,
London WC1X 8JL
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Set in Times

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Collins, Glasgow

For David Ferring,
Donald MacKenzie, Eve Christopher,
and especially Harry Adam Knight
– kindred spirits

Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil.
Habakkuk. 1,13

Prologue

It was done, then.

From the high cliffs above the inhospitable beaches west of Penthor, the man watched as a small motor launch chugged out to deep waters. It was dark, and the boat was visible only by its sea lights. But the man had been watching it for some minutes, making sure that it left the harbour and went to its fatal rendezvous.

A cold wind blew. The sea rushed and pounded against the rocks below. Night birds shrieked and wheeled in the darkness, darting shapes that hunted the onshore breezes.

After a while, the lights on the launch went out. The man, watching from the safety of the land, smiled as he squinted, as he strained to see what was happening. The dark shape of the boat rocked, then began to go down. It went down stern first: the prow remained above the water for a few seconds, and then that too vanished.

'Goodbye, Mr Palmer . . . ' the man on the cliffs breathed. He looked up into the sky and grinned.

'Stand by to receive three – two of them quite innocent . . .'

Out over the water an eerie light shimmered. As he watched, so the light moved like an animal, back towards the coast. When it came to the shore it vanished, dissipating rapidly into the air. There was a distant sound. It might have been a scream, or a cry of triumph.

When the man was sure that it was safe again, he returned to his own house, half a mile away.

It was done, then.

He was the only one left.

Chapter One

As Peter Conway paid off the taxi and carried his heavy case the few yards to the door of the Bay View Hotel, a sudden gust of icy wind announced, to his irritation, that the weather was about to change for the worse.

When he had stepped down from the London-Penzance express, five miles away at Little Lynn, the sky had been clear and the sun pleasantly warm. A perfect April day. Now, looking to the west across the impressive spread of grey ocean, he could see thunderheads massing. Iron-grey wisps of cloud were already scudding overhead, and there were drops of rain in the air.

Peter knew all about the storms which could suddenly blow in off the Atlantic when the wind direction shifted. In a letter, inviting him to visit Penthor, Peter's boyhood friend Andrew deSolla had mentioned the gloomy weather extensively. It was years since the two men had last met – at Oxford University, during Andrew's third year? Or was it even earlier? – and most of the wordage of that first renewed communication between them had been a lyrical essay about the dramatic transformation that a storm could effect upon the Cornish landscape.

'A photographer's paradise. Bring Nikons. Bring Olympi. Bring Agfa Instamatics. You'll not be disappointed. *Please* make the effort. I'm very anxious to renew old friendships . . .'

Peter, who was a Londoner and a sun-worshipper, found nothing lyrical about being cold and wet, nor could he see much point in photographing rain, although he'd almost certainly be able to sell any suitably dramatic 'sun breaking through rain-veil' pictures to one of the amateur photographic magazines. It was Andrew who had always been the outdoor

type, *and* Andrew who had been the romantic at heart. Hence his choice of remotest Cornwall in which to conduct his strange research.

How things change, Peter thought rather sadly. At eighteen, he and Andrew had been inseparable, soul-mates, confidants, even blood-brothers. Now, eight years later, he wasn't even sure what he would say to Andrew when he met him.

The taxi made a U-turn, tyres screeching unnecessarily. It trailed a thick blue plume of exhaust smoke as it went.

Peter watched it depart with relief. The driver had been one of those rural types who never seem to contemplate the possibility of traffic coming in the other direction, cutting across every blind corner without the slightest hint of deceleration, looking back over the seat and boring his passenger with an account of the pubs in the area and the kinds of real ale they served.

At one point he had taken both hands off the wheel to augment his words with a few gestures. Peter's mixed shock of irritation and terror had caused him to enquire politely which pub served the best lager and lime.

He had been rewarded with a derisive grunt and a renewal of the driver's concentration on his job; which unfortunately meant that he drove even faster.

So Peter Conway was much relieved when, after twenty minutes of the roller-coaster journey, the high hedgerows and narrow roads had opened out and were replaced by the brightly painted retirement bungalows which formed Penthor's outskirts. Beyond these, the road curved sharply and plunged steeply into the ancient heart of the town.

Most of the buildings in Penthor looked stone built, and many were painted white. But modern shops were scattered among the family grocers and grim-looking haberdasheries. Peter had counted three pubs on the way through, and one church, a grey-stoned building standing prominently in the centre of its encompassing cemetery. The town centre itself did not exactly bustle with activity, but was bright and interesting, with an odd and ancient monument in the middle of the road

To reach the Bay View Hotel they had driven right out of the town again and up onto the eastern promontory overlooking

the harbour. The hotel itself, a big Victorian double-fronted villa, seemed curiously at odds with both landscape and the rest of the area, a dark-brick folly standing alone and unwelcome where the sea winds blew strongest.

Peter opened the heavy glass-panelled front door and let himself into the house. The hallway was typical of a small family hotel: a scuffed floral carpet, wallpaper which didn't quite match, a pay phone, and a rack of dog-eared brochures advertising pony-trekking, shark-fishing and the local potteries. At the far end was the curved reception desk, faced with cheap pine veneer.

Peter dropped his bag in the middle of the floor and rang the bell on the desk. After half a minute or so a man came down the stairs into the hallway.

He was of indeterminate middle age, anywhere between forty and fifty-five, his skin tanned and leathery from wind and sun. The top of his head was bald and freckled, a few thinning gingery curls clung to the sides of his scalp.

'Sorry to keep you,' he said. 'Mr Conway, is it?'

'That's right.'

The man lifted the hinged portion of the counter to let himself behind the desk. He rummaged in a drawer until he found a registration card, which he handed to Peter.

'Brought the rain with you, I see.'

'Sorry about that.'

'These squalls pass quickly, though. An hour or so . . .'

'Glad to hear it.'

As Peter filled in the card the man continued to make friendly, inconsequential small-talk. The card bore a printed heading: BAY VIEW HOTEL. Props: M. Flynn & Mrs G. Danton.

This would be Flynn, Peter imagined. The man had blue eyes which added to the Irishness of his features, even though his tones were purest Cornwall.

'Just one night is it, Mr Conway?' Flynn asked.

'Yes. Thanks.'

'Business trip, then. Needs more than a day to see round this part of the coast.'

Ignoring the unexpected curiosity (he had always assumed

members of such remote communities as Penthor to be unforthcoming and unquestioning), Peter shook his head. 'I'm a photographer by profession, so in one way I'm always on business. But I'm down to see a friend. I came down a day early to look around by myself. To take some pictures . . .'

Flynn studied Peter carefully, thoughtfully, murmuring, 'Photography, is it? As a profession. Funerals, then. Weddings, that sort of thing . . .'

Uncomfortable beneath Flynn's steady scrutiny, Peter smiled pleasantly.

'Yes. That sort of thing.'

God forbid that I should ever sink to photographing coffins!

He completed the registration card just as Flynn asked, 'And your friend would be . . . who, I wonder? It's a small community. We're bound sure to know him.'

Damn your nosiness!

With only the slightest edge of irascibility in his voice, Peter said, 'His name's Andrew deSolla. He moved to Penthor about three years ago.'

He had been looking straight at Flynn when he said this, and though the other man's expression scarcely flickered, Peter was acutely conscious of the set of mental shutters that suddenly closed behind his eyes.

In a dull, suddenly cold voice, Flynn said, 'Oh yes. Mr deSolla.'

He took the registration card and cursorily scanned it, then placed it behind the counter out of sight. Peter smiled inwardly. This was more like the small community mentality: insular, slow to accept newcomers. It was not hard to imagine that the moody, intense spirit of Andrew deSolla had had a difficult time fitting in.

'My sister will show you to your room, Mr Conway,' Flynn said, and he called, 'Gabrielle!'

His shout brought a woman — obviously the co-proprietor — from a room in the back of the hotel. Peter found his pulse involuntarily quickening, for Gabrielle Danton was a remarkably attractive woman, her small oval face framed by a cap of dark, glossy hair. She wore a fisherman's smock which, like her jeans, was faded and well-worn, but communicated a

sense of confident style. She was in her mid-thirties, Peter guessed. Normally speaking he was not attracted to women so much older than himself, but there were exceptions to every rule. He constructed a immediate fantasy – something he enjoyed doing – in which she was a bored widow, unfulfilled in a village full of yokels, living her life in expectation of the arrival, from the big city, of a sophisticated younger man . . .

Gabrielle Danton greeted him with professional friendliness, but Peter was disappointed to note that, far from giving him a look full of longing, promise and invitation, she hardly glanced at him, seeming distracted and tired. Oh well. As they climbed the wide staircase she explained apologetically that they didn't provide dinner out of season, but she could recommend a very good restaurant in the town itself.

His room was obviously the best in the house, commanding a fine view from its large bay window. It was clearly intended as a family room, with three beds and its own shower cubicle. The décor, however, was quite predictably kitsch.

Peter dumped his case on the double bed and commented on the satisfactoriness of the room. Keen to delay the woman's departure, still playing out his fantasy, he started talking about his intention of taking some photographs of the area.

'Are you a professional photographer, Mr Conway?' she asked as he opened his shoulder bag to reveal an impressive array of camera accessories and the sleek chrome-alloy Canon Super X which he always used. Her voice was soft, the Cornish accent not pronounced.

'Yes. For my sins. I run my own business, mostly freelance advertising work and photomontage. Scenic work and portraits are the hobby side of the job.'

She was looking at him with more interest now, he thought, her dark eyes intensely focused.

'Well . . . I hope the weather gets better for you,' she said.

He laughed easily, unlocking his case, but acutely aware of the woman's continued presence.

'I certainly seem to have brought you a dose of London gloom.'

'The country round here's beautiful no matter what the weather,' she said, echoing Andrew deSolla's written sentiments.

Peter had found, and spread out, the map of the area which he had bought at Little Lynn. Gabrielle Danton came closer and pointed to the western cliff path. Her proximity, and the hint of sweat and perfume on her, were very disturbing. 'That's a lovely walk along the cliffs, towards Polden Bay.'

'What about to the east? The cliffs look higher. More spectacular view, no doubt.'

But Gabrielle shook her head slightly – a small but decisive gesture. 'No. I wouldn't do that, Mr Conway. People don't walk the east cliff, not if they've any sense. That path's treacherous. It ought to be closed off, really. There's rock slides, and it's boggy in places, and when the wind comes in off the sea it can pluck you off the exposed parts as easy as anything. Only last year a young couple were blown off into the sea – and it's a hundred foot drop. You should stick to the west. The path's better, it's more sheltered – and you'll not complain about the view.'

Peter straightened up and smiled. 'The west it is then. Thanks.'

She turned and walked to the door, but stopped when Peter added, 'One other thing . . .'

As she regarded him curiously, Peter felt his own curiousity being teased. She had been quite mysterious about the cliff walk to the east of Penthor harbour. And she herself affected a slightly mysterious air, too cool, too intermittently quizzical to be behaving normally. Peter was wondering what effect Andrew's name would have on her.

'Your brother,' he said, and went on quickly when she made no response at all. 'He reacted rather strangely when I told him who I'd come to visit in Penthor.'

'Who have you come to visit?' she asked in a deadpan voice.

'Andrew deSolla. We were old school friends. Do you know him?'

No flicker of a change of expression touched her face. She said, 'I know *of* him, of course. I've met the others who live in his house.'

'His wife,' Peter said, wondering idly what sort of woman Samantha would turn out to be.

'And her brother.'

Peter was surprised. He hadn't known about the brother. 'What's he like?'

But Gabrielle Danton just said, 'Good evening, Mr Conway. I hope you enjoy your stay,' and closed the door behind her.

An hour later he sat in the lounge bar of the Key and Anchor, sipping lager and staring moodily through the window at the harbour, where the storm was now in full fury. He was moody because he was wet, having had to walk down to the harbour pub through increasingly driving rain. It was impossible to put up an umbrella, because of the wind, and moisture had quickly begun to soak through his allegedly waterproof combat jacket. He had removed his jacket and towelled his hair in the pub's toilet, but his jeans still flapped limply and wetly against his legs. The pub was almost empty. A couple of locals – probably fishermen – stood at one end of the bar with the landlord, listening to a BBC announcer reading a gale warning in incongruously calm tones.

Still, the storm was undeniably impressive The harbour had been closed, stout wooden floodgates swung across the narrow opening between two stone piers. Beyond the walls, skeins and drifts of creamy spray were thrown high into the air by the pounding sea.

Inside the harbour the grey lagoon was whipped into tiny white-caps by the swirling wind. As Peter watched, the gale caught an improperly furled sail on a pleasure dinghy, unwinding it with casual precision, stripping it from the mast and sending it flapping across the water like an immense sheet of newspaper.

The sky overhead was like a featureless panel of zinc, and the whole scene was lit with a curiously intense amber light, now fading as dusk gave way to evening. Spatters of rain, and occasionally hail, were intermittently driven against the pub window as the wind constantly shifted direction. There was nobody to be seen outside. He was vaguely aware of the phone ringing at the bar, and of an increasedly animated conversation there, but he paid it no attention until outside a klaxon began to sound, its whooping note carrying eerily across the deserted village.

He turned to the bar, in time to see the landlord and one of the fishermen hurrying to the door, pulling on yellow oilskins. There was obviously an emergency of some kind. He carried his empty glass to the counter, where a woman had taken the landlord's place.

'What's the panic?'

'The lifeboat crew's been called out,' she said, her friendly face filled with concern. 'My husband's the bo'sun.'

'I wouldn't have thought even a lifeboat could go out in this,' Peter said, gesturing towards the window and the storm outside.

'They go out in much worse,' the woman said coldly. 'But not this time. There's a boat washed up on the east shore, out past the harbour.'

'What kind of boat?'

'A pleasure boat of some sort, Jim said.' She began to wash dirty glasses in the sink below the bar. 'Must have been caught at sea.' She shook her head, almost angrily. 'Lord knows, there have been enough gale warnings today. They've only themselves to blame. Some people are so . . . so . . . ' She slammed the tray of washed glasses onto the drainer, lost for words, unable to find a polite expression to describe people whose thoughtlessness might endanger her husband's life.

'The east shore,' Peter repeated, suddenly sensing an opportunity. He had his camera with him, as always, and a shipwreck by flash light, in such filthy weather, would certainly provide some good, saleable pictures. 'How do I get there?'

The landlady told him, then turned away, to busy herself with bar chores. Peter shrugged his damp jacket back on, checked the settings on his camera, then stepped out into the icy rain.

Men clad in yellow oilskins were emerging from side streets, trotting purposefully towards the harbour. The sound of the klaxon died away, and almost at the same moment a spotlight flared on the harbour wall. Its bright white beam speared across the lagoon, but was then swung around until it pointed outwards.

Peter ran quickly along the road by the side of the harbour, and mounted the steep steps to the wall. More steps led down

the other side to the shoreline. Years ago there must have been a rock-fall here. Instead of a beach there was a wide expanse of tumbled boulders, many of them as big as cars. The cliff from which they had dislodged was not high, this close to the lagoon, but rose steeply and dramatically to the east, a jagged black silhouette against the grey storm skies.

Peter picked his way carefully through the rubble, slipping and grazing his hand as he protected his camera from damage. The footing was treacherous, a combination of slick weed and rain. The gusting gale threatened to catch him off balance and throw him on his back, and he moved towards the clearer beach like a crab, gripping onto any prominent piece of rock for dear life.

The rain squalled, blinding him, but he could hear voices, and see lights ahead. The light from the harbour wall was occasionally flung in that direction, but was mainly being used to scan the ocean for any other boats in distress.

Beyond the rock-fall a group of lifeboatmen were clustered at the water's edge, attaching a line to the wreck, which looked pathetically tiny and frail against the rocks. Behind it the sea rose in a series of immense rollers, which broke on the shore with a deafening noise. Peter tracked the line back to the harbour wall, where it was attached to a winch manned by two other yellow-clad figures.

The beam from the harbour wall suddenly illuminated the scene in eerie highlight, and Peter shot three frames, steadying the camera by sitting down for a moment. Then he took flashlight photographs in long shot before moving up closer.

Standing apart from the group who were clustered around the wreck were two men in heavy, dark raincoats. Peter hadn't noticed them before. They were sheltering – if such a concept was applicable – in the slight lee of the cliffs, watching the activity by the sea-line. One was carrying a small black medical bag and the other looked like a priest, although Peter only had a brief glimpse of white collar with which to support that assumption.

He made his way over to them, tugging his jacket tight around his neck, and shouted above the deafening sound of wind and surf. 'I'm staying at the hotel . . . anything I can do?'

'Nothing,' the priest shouted back, adding 'Thank you.'

'What happened?'

The priest was a hawk faced man of about sixty, his white hair plastered to his scalp. Rain dripped from his nose as he stared suspiciously at Peter. 'A wreck,' he said loudly. 'As you can see . . .'

'All drowned?'

The man with the doctor's bag stepped forward A younger man, with an arrogant look that managed to penetrate even the rain that soaked his features, he said, 'Just who *are* you?'

'As I said . . . a visitor I heard the klaxon and came to see if– '

'Go *back*, then,' the doctor interurrupted. 'There are trained men here, dealing with everything. You're in the way.'

He turned from Peter, who shivered inside his coat and wondered whether to try the 'I'm with the Press' gambit which he so often used. He decided against it. There was something . . . not so much *wrong* here, as not right. He couldn't identify it.

The priest stared at him, then moved away, out of the slight shelter of the cliff.

Peter did not take the suggested advice. He remained, watching the group as they searched the wreck which looked, through its battered and weed-racked hull, like an ordinary cabin cruiser. The two sombrely dressed men stood a short way off, talking quietly together.

A cry, then, from the sea's edge. One of the lifeboatmen was waving to the priest and calling through cupped hands.

'It's the *Aspidistra!*'

By the boat there seemed to be a change in the men's attitude. They had all backed off, and were standing in the rain, staring at the wreck. Some of them were looking up the beach It was as if none of them knew what to do. It was as if . . .

As if they're *frightened*, Peter thought.

'Storm must have dislodged it!' the man called from the wreck. 'Must have been in the bay all the time What do we do?'

'Winch it farther up the shore!' the doctor called Peter

followed at a distance as the men walked down the beach with an odd caution They were disturbed. Everybody was disturbed.

The winch began to wind with a loud creaking noise, and the boat was pulled fully onto the shore, its timbers cracking and splintering as it was dragged over the water-polished rocks.

One of the men – an older man, in yellow sou'wester and oilskins – sounded almost melodramatic as he said, 'The sea returns what it takes . . .'

Another voice said, 'Sea should have kept this 'un. This don't seem good to me!'

'Be silent!' the priest said angrily. He was ripping weed from where it clogged the cruiser's windows. He was shining a torch inside. 'They're in there,' he said grimly, and added, 'Don't go inside for a moment.'

The lifeboatmen who had been about to enter the lower cabin – it was the landlord of the Key & Anchor, Peter noticed – hesitated, watching the priest. The sour-faced doctor stood behind the cleric, whispering. The priest nodded, then raised his hands and made the sign of the cross. 'In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit . . . Begone, begone! Do not harm us. Do not rise up. Begone! In the Name of Our Father, who is in heaven . . .'

He drew back from the boat, then, and the landlord of the pub broke down the small door to the lower cabin. He ducked inside.

It was nearly an hour before the bodies were brought out of the *Aspidistra* – an hour in which full darkness fell, the temperature dropped and the rain scarcely abated. A young lifeboatman, who assumed that Peter was part of the rescue force, gave him a spare waterproof, which Peter donned gratefully. His clothes were sodden underneath, but the oilskin seemed to lessen the cold and the risk of exposure.

Mostly he was ignored, obviously regarded as a nuisance. Doctor and priest both disappeared for a long time inside the cabin. A grim-faced local hurried away and returned with two policemen. Knots of men stood around, talking in low voices When Peter tried to approach, they fell silent. All he managed to learn was that the boat had been hired by a local man, Philip

Palmer, and had had two youths on board, a boy and a girl, who had been seen in the town during the week preceding the *Aspidistra's* disappearance. The *Aspidistra* had last been seen sailing, after dusk, out of the harbour with the three of them on board. It had not returned, and was presumed to have gone down in very deep water.

Finally, one policeman and an ashen-faced lifeboatman emerged from the boat's cabin, carefully carrying a tarpaulin between them, like a makeshift hammock. Peter stepped closer as they descended from boat to shore. They made no attempt to conceal its grisly contents from him, and he stared with fascinated horror at the jumble of slimy bones, some of them still joined by lengths of sinew, and draped in rags of swollen, livid flesh. As he watched, crabs and other sea life moved among the remains. A swatch of colourless hair hung from the otherwise bare skull, but Peter had no idea whether this had been a man or a woman. A second body was brought out, in a similar state and, once they were laid on the foreshore, a lifeboatman came and stitched the tarpaulins into makeshift shrouds, which were then carried away to the harbour, where an ambulance waited.

When the third body was brought out – by the doctor and the priest – Peter saw that the shroud was already stitched up. He was puzzled by this, but supposed that they had been at work in the confines of the cabin while the second set of grisly remains had been unloaded. He followed as the funerary procession made its way to the quayside, pausing now and again to take a flash lit photograph.

To Peter's surprise, this third, enshrouded corpse was carried to a waiting hearse, and not to the ambulance. Both the doctor and the priest climbed in alongside the driver, and the long black car moved away, its headlights picking out the harbour cobblestones through the bright veil of rain. Peter walked slowly to the ambulance and went up to the driver, who was sitting behind the wheel smoking a cigarette and looking quite unconcerned.

'Press,' he said, and held up his camera. The ambulance driver glanced at him.

'Press what?'

'I'm a reporter . . .'

'How nice,' the man said, disinterestedly.

'Why are they taking the other body separately?' Peter asked, trying not to be put off by the cold attitude of the other man.

The driver shrugged. 'Doctor wants to do an autopsy,' he said. 'More left on that one than the others. Don't envy him the task, though.'

Someone banged on the back of the ambulance and the man reached for the ignition key. The vehicle streaked away along the harbour road, up towards Penthor, its blue light continuing to register in the foul night long after the ambulance itself had vanished.

It was getting late and Peter was shivering under the waterproof. But something continued to nag at his curiosity: a vague, almost peripheral sense that this was not quite the way these scenes were supposed to be enacted. He determined to play his adopted reporter's role to the full – after all, there were newspaper contacts who might take a story as well as pictures – and talk to the doctor. He walked over to the two men who were securing the winch gear and asked directions to the doctor's surgery. It was about five minutes' walk from the harbour.

The wind was dying as he picked his way between the puddles, and the rain suddenly reduced to a series of stinging flurries. Overhead, the cloud began to break, and a half moon could be glimpsed from time to time.

The doctor lived in a solid, early Victorian detached house, but his surgery was a modern, single-storey addition to one side. By the time Peter reached the place the hearse had gone, but there were lights on inside the small annexe that served as a consultation room. He walked up the drive, shoes crunching softly on the wet gravel. The path took him past the surgery window before reaching the door. As he passed he glanced casually through partly-slitted venetian blinds . . .

And stopped dead at what he saw.

The third corpse was laid out on the examination table. There could be no mistake as to its identity, for the tarpaulin was still spread beneath it. But this was no gruesome tangle of remains.

On the table lay the complete, undecayed body of a man who might have died only hours before, but who had – from the look of his face – not gone peacefully into the endless night. There were no marks on the corpse that Peter could see, but the hand that was visible to him was a contorted claw, and the staring eyes and drawn-back lips suggested that this was a witness to some unguessable horror.

As far as Peter could judge, the body was of a man in his thirties.

Palmer, then, and not one of the unidentified youngsters. He had a sharp, rather weaselly face, covered by an unusual number of freckles or moles, but was otherwise nondescript.

Fantastic explanations raced through Peter's mind. He had once read a novel in which a group of people found themselves trapped on the sea-bed in their sunken ship, but survived in an air pocket and lived for years. Perhaps Palmer had done the same and had been reduced to cannibalism for survival?

But no, that was absurd. The people in the book had been inside an empty tanker, whose holds provided plenty of air. A man would suffocate in hours inside the *Aspidistra's* cabin. Besides, no such explanation could account for that dreadful expression . . . Peter knew well enough that rigor mortis did not do that kind of thing to a body.

While he stood at the window, the door to the surgery opened and the priest came in. He had removed his coat and was dressed, now, in surplice and cassock, as if about to conduct a service. He was carrying a bag which he placed on a side table and opened. From it he withdrew a silver cross, a small brass bell and a vial. To Peter's astonishment he proceeded to ring the bell over the body, beginning at the face, then the neck, the chest, the belly, and so on until, at the end, he rang it six times over the grey-hued feet. Then he placed the cross vertically in the cadaver's mouth. He rang the bell again and mouthed words that Peter could not hear.

And then . . .

And then he sprinkled droplets from the vial on the corpse's face and chest, and as he watched, Peter was sure that the body of Philip Palmer *trembled*.

It was a fleeting motion, the aberration of an instant. As the

pale liquid from the vial splashed upon its grey skin, the cadaver twiched, the hands grasped, the mouth opened and shut, as if with a final death tremor.

Peter blinked and smeared the window, trying to see more clearly through the blurring rivulets of rainwater.

Perhaps it *had* just been a trick of rain, light and fatigue . . .

The last thing that he saw was the priest removing the cross from Palmer's mouth and raising it above the body's chest, as if to use it as a knife.

Then the robed man hesitated and glanced across to the window. He frowned and placed the cross down on the table.

As Peter moved aside, the priest walked across the room and drew shut a pair of heavy curtains.

Chapter Two

Sele House, where Andrew deSolla lived, stood somewhere along the first rising heights of the west cliffs, where a walker could still look down upon the bay and the clustered houses of Penthor. To get there it was necessary to walk down to the harbour and take a steep, narrow road which climbed westward, curving away from the dangerous cliffs at the point where the cliff path began.

It was a warm, sunny day, all traces of last night's storm long vanished, and Peter Conway paused frequently to take photographs and enjoy the view.

Penthor lay spread out below him in an enjoyably random jumble of grey-white stone. The harbour was like a pool of pale amethyst, in which brightly coloured toy boats bobbed up and down. The sea was smooth and glossy, moving in great slow undulations, and a couple of miles to the south-east he could see a cluster of fishing boats.

From this distance, the tumbled rocks of the east shore looked like sandy pebbles. On the cliff tops above them, the dense stands of tangled, wild grown trees had almost completely masked the two or three large, impressive-looking houses which stood there. Peter could see grey slate roofs, chimney stacks, and the occasional gleam of sunlight on windows among the spreading foliage.

When he had walked down to the town mid-morning he had been surprised to discover the wreck gone: evidently the locals had been up and about earlier than he had, and had probably lifted it off and towed it round to the harbour on the early tide. He had tried to engage one or two local shopkeepers in conversation about the tragedy, but received only monosyllabic replies. He was not particularly surprised: inbred communities

like this would be accustomed to grief brought by the sea, and would not willingly share it with curious and possibly ghoulish outsiders.

On a day like this it was difficult to imagine Penthor as the scene of such catclysmic events, particularly one with such odd features. Peter puzzled about what he had seen long after he had returned to Bay View, shed his sodden clothes and relaxed in a long hot bath. He had hoped he might be able to talk through what had happened with Gabrielle Danton. He pictured a conversation deep into the night, turning gradually to more personal and intimate matters.

But though she had been solicitous at his bedraggled state, and had brought him several towels, a platter of cold pork and a huge mug of boiling tea, she disavowed interest in the wreck, saying it was all too horrible; she hated even thinking about such things.

Peter *had* thought about them, his mind going round and round, but eventually he determined that he would do the simplest thing and wait to see what the local newspaper had to say.

Andrew had provided a sketch map giving directions to the house. 'It's a real old pile of a place,' his letter had said, 'but you'd never know it was there from the road.'

Peter smiled at the thought of seeing his old friend again. It had been — what? – over four years. Amazing how the time slipped by once you left university and got into a working routine. He had begun to think of Andrew as a lost friend, someone with whom he would exchange Christmas cards for the next decade or so, until even that became too much trouble. Then the invitation (or perhaps 'summons') to visit had arrived. Out of the blue, almost.

Peter had been delighted to accept. He hated losing touch with friends, even while simultaneously finding it too much effort to maintain contact. And Andrew had been much more than just another friend: for eight years they had been almost like brothers. No, closer than that, closer than most brothers become. They had been real soul-mates, a single mind in two bodies. Not even the welcome and ever-present company of Peter's cousin Mary – the third member of their childhood

'gang' – had affected the exquisite sense of intimacy that the two young men had experienced.

Peter came out of his fond daydream of old times to discover that he was passing the town sign for Penthor - which meant that he had done exactly as Andrew had predicted and missed the entrance. He retraced his steps for a couple of hundred yards along the cliff top road, and found it: a pair of mossy pillars set in a tangled hedge whose appearance testified to the strength of the winds that blew from the ocean. An overgrown gravel path led into a stand of what looked like uncultivated woodland. A tarnished brass plate the size of a postcard on one pillar announced the house's name.

Andrew had said that Sele House stood in several acres of grounds on the top of the west cliff, but Peter had visualised rolling lawns rather than the semi-wilderness in which he found himself. He found, however, that he preferred the reality. It was calm in the early afternoon sunlight, which filtered down through trees just coming into leaf, dappling the ferns and grass below.

On an impulse he struck out sideways, away from the gravel drive, moving in the direction of the sea again, through the thickets and briar of the untamed garden. The ground was a little soft underfoot, but had dried out remarkably quickly considering the soaking it had received. Sandy soil, good drainage.

As he walked he listened for the sounds of animals – there might be foxes here, even deer. He had gone only about a hundred yards when he became aware of an odd gasping noise off to his left. It sounded human, and Peter's immediate thought was that someone might have injured themselves walking the cliff path. He made for the sound, and as he approached he realised that it was not one note but two, one higher than the other, but both in a similar rhythm.

He was puzzled for a moment, then realisation dawned and he was unable to suppress a smile of guilty excitement.

It was pleasure that he was hearing, not pain.

Peter moved surreptitiously through the undergrowth, careful to avoid stepping on twigs which might give him away with the sound of their breaking. He controlled his breathing, keeping it slow, even . . . and silent.

The gasping grew louder, until he began to see evidence of movement through the screening leaves of a large evergreen bush. He crept as close as he dared, and carefully parted two branches to peer between them.

The couple — a local couple, no doubt, taking advantage of the remoteness and privacy of these grounds — were about twenty feet away, in the middle of an area of open grass. The man was lying in a shallow depression in the ground. All Peter could see of him was a pair of powerful, tanned arms. But the naked woman astride him was in full magnificent view.

Peter had never seen such a woman. It was not just that she was good-looking, although even now, with her face mostly obscured by a cascade of dark hair and her mouth open as she gasped in rhythm, he could sense her beauty. It was not even that she had an incredible body, slim and lightly tanned, her breasts large, yet as firm as an adolescent's. There was something more. She seemed almost to crackle with invisible energy as she controlled the couple's lovemaking, rotating and thrusting her pelvis, running her hands over the man's body and her own, while all he could do was feebly stroke her thighs.

A thin sheen of sweat made her body seem to glow.

Peter found that his mouth was dry and his heart pounding so hard that the surges of blood sang in his ears. *God*, he thought, *don't let me have a heart attack now!*

Almost by reflex he reached for his camera and reeled off half a dozen shots in quick succession. The quiet whirring as the film wound itself on seemed deafening, but the couple were too preoccupied to notice. He felt pangs of guilt at this invasion of two strangers' privacy, but at the same time it was too good an opportunity to miss. Peter had never witnessed another couple making love, though he had on occasion been with groups of drunken friends in crowded rooms, watching flickering 8mm films that were always strangely disappointing.

There was nothing disappointing here, except that he was cast in the role of voyeur rather than participant.

As he watched, the woman shifted her position, reached down, and with surprising strength pulled the man into a semi-upright position, his mouth to one of her breasts. Peter was astonished to see that he was middle-aged and balding . . .

and then doubly astonished to realise that he recognised the man, with his tufts of gingery hair.

It was Flynn, the co-proprietor of the Bay View Hotel!

Good God, Peter thought. *What's a woman like her doing with someone like him!*

The woman let Flynn fall, and he flopped back as if totally drained. Then she turned for the first time towards Peter's hiding place and looked straight at him. Her eyes were an odd shade of dark blue, almost purple. Peter had never seen such a colour before.

She can't see me, he thought. But although he was sure his concealment was complete, there was no doubt that she was looking *at* him. He felt her aura of energy reach out and flicker around him. Her eyes seemed to draw him towards her. She smiled, and her tongue flicked out and ran around her upper lip. Still fixing him with her gaze, she ran both hands across her thighs, stomach and breasts, in an erotic gesture clearly intended for him.

His mind a confused mixture of embarrassment, excitement and a curious apprehension, Peter began to back away. As quickly as he could he retraced his steps to the main gravel path.

The house was a rambling Victorian construction of grey brick. Bay windows faced east and north beneath deep gables. Lichens clung to the slate roof – Peter could see that in two or three places the slates had become dislodged, presumably by last night's storm – and a large creeper of some kind, not yet into leaf, covered much of the brickwork. There was a wide semi-circle of weedy gravel in front of the house, rutted with tyre tracks in which pools of water still glimmered.

Peter walked up to the front door. His pulse seemed to have returned to normal, but his mind was still racing. Penthor was obviously an eventful village. He could hardly wait until he could get Andrew alone and tell him what he had just seen. With any luck Andrew might know who the girl was, and be able to tell him something about her. In a village so small she would hardly pass unnoticed.

There was an old ceramic bellpush set in a greenish brass plate beside the door. Peter pressed it, waited, pressed again.

No reply.

He tried the heavy lion's-paw door knocker. No response. He peered through one of the dingy stained-glass panels set in the door, and was rewarded with a dim view of a large deserted hallway. He stepped back, surveyed the front of the house. Andrew had said that he would be at home all day. All the curtains were drawn back, so he was presumably up and about.

Peter walked around the south side of the house, where another gravel path ran between the house itself and a large, slightly dilapidated garage. He realised that he was slightly disorientated, now, and uncertain as to where the lovers were stretched out, so he proceeded cautiously. He was in a back garden which was basically a huge swath of lawn sloping down towards the harbour, but screened by trees. Beyond the curve of the grass he could see the grey-blue sea stretching to the horizon.

It was a spectacular position for a house.

The lawn was bordered by evergreen shrubs, and to the left Peter could see an elderly gardener bent over one of them, gathering chippings which he placed in a basket at his side. Wondering if the grey-haired man knew of the way the wilder parts of his garden were being used, Peter walked over to him.

'I'm sorry to disturb you. I was looking for Mr deSolla. Has he gone out, do you know?'

The man straightened up. Still looking down at the shrubs – unusual shrubs, Peter noticed; unusual, rather unplesant shapes, with wild colours – he said, 'Mr deSolla never goes out these days.'

Peter recognised the voice at once. He gasped with shock. 'Andrew . . .?' he said.

'Hello Peter. Glad you could come . . .'

Peter knew that he was incapable of suppressing the expression of dismay on his face as he stared at the shockingly transformed figure of his old friend. He didn't try.

'Andrew . . .' he repeated. 'I can't believe it's you . . .'

Andrew deSolla was twenty-five years old. He should have been an athletic, fit young man, with bright eyes and wild, tawny hair. The man who stood here, now, was more than twice the age of twenty-five, and the years hung on him like

rags. It was not so much that his hair was totally grey – that was not so uncommon – but that his whole appearance and demeanour reinforced rather than dispelled the impression of elderliness. His face had become deeply lined and drawn; his skin was leathery and dotted with liver spots; he moved stiffly, as though afflicted with rheumatism.

Twenty-five years old!

'You've stared long enough,' he said to Peter, and brushed dirt from his hands. He gazed at Peter with an expression almost of amusement. There was a wry smile on the thin, moist lips. 'Didn't I tell you I'd been ill?'

'Well yes . . .' Andrew had certainly mentioned a long and mysterious sickness in his letter, but Peter had not imagined anything nearly so debilitating. 'I never realised . . . I mean, it must have been really serious . . . Christ, Andrew, why didn't you let me know?'

With the merest of shrugs, Andrew said, 'Never occurred to me to make a fuss. I've lived with the thing for so long.' His eyes brightened slightly. 'You're looking well, though.'

'I keep fit,' Peter said dully, still disturbed by his old friend.

Andrew held up his basket of cuttings. 'Ever seen plants like this before?' There was a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. Peter shook his head.

'Exotic?'

'Not at all. That's mandrake, that's hellebore, some henbane, a sprig of wolfsbane.'

'The herbs of the occultist,' Peter said. 'Witch's brew.'

'That's right,' Andrew laughed. 'Maybe we'll have them with our supper. And then again, maybe not . . .'

'Still studying the Hidden Arts, eh?'

'Parapsychology, yes. It's in the blood. I'll be a student until I die, Peter . . .'

Which, from the look of him, Peter reflected sombrely, would not be long coming.

Andrew suddenly shivered, even though the day was bright and hot. 'Let's go in, shall we? Getting cold . . .'

'Fine by me.' And he followed Andrew, who walked with the shuffling gait of an invalid, back to the house.

Inside, the rooms were all uncomfortably hot, the central

heating turned up full blast Peter gratefully discarded his jacket and followed Andrew into the library, which was furnished with two deep, luxurious armchairs. As deSolla poured whisky for them, Peter wandered curiously around the room.

'You've done well for yourself, Andrew. This is a magnificent place. Are these books all yours?'

'Everything is mine,' Andrew murmured. The decanter rattled against glass, testifying as to the unsteadiness of his hand.

The room was obviously the product of an educated and wealthy taste. There was a fine Chinese carpet on the floor, and the furniture was all antique, and all in excellent condition. Two walls were lined with paintings, pride of place going to a pair of watercolour sketches which even to Peter's eyes were obviously Turners. A third and fourth wall were completely hidden behind floor-to-ceiling bookcases filled with antiquarian volumes. Side tables were littered with a casually elegant clutter of objets d'art African bronze sculptures, oriental jades, exquisitely carved ivory figurines, Staffordshire pottery. Peter's low-level envy was mixed with curiosity. Andrew and his family had never shown signs of wealth, so how had he acquired all this in the space of four years?

Andrew handed Peter a glass and they seated themselves in the deep armchairs. Peter sipped the Scotch, which was smooth and excellent. He complimented Andrew

'I thought you'd like it. Glen Morangie. Good stuff.'

'You're surrounded by good stuff, Andrew.' Peter raised his glass. 'Here's to the good side of your life.'

'And here's to friendship,' Andrew returned, raising his glass in turn so that the cut crystal flashed and sparkled in the daylight streaming from the window of the library.

'I've missed you,' Peter said. 'I hate to lose touch '

'Me too. And I miss Mary. Lovely Mary. Do you see her at all?'

'Not as often as I'd like,' Peter said. 'We talk on the phone. But the relationship became . . . well, a little difficult.'

Andrew stared at him curiously, then smiled. 'Lovely Mary,' he repeated, and nodded, as if satisfying himself about some-

thing. 'I always found her a disturbing girl. I didn't want to think of her in a sexual way. But it was impossible not to. I'm surprised we didn't end up fighting over her.'

'She'd have been furious,' Peter murmured, thinking of the girl's wild temper, and the way she had always wanted to be equal with the others, but being much younger always ended up, somehow, the child following on.

Andrew was right, though. When Mary had grown into a woman, the relationship between the three of them had become very difficult. Mary may have been a woman, but neither Peter nor Andrew were sufficiently adult to control their deeper, stronger feelings. They had left unspoken thoughts and unwelcome passions that would have been better expressed and admitted to.

Andrew sighed. 'We all go back so far. So far. I was never as close to anyone else as I was to you two. Not until I met Samantha, at least.'

In the shock of seeing Andrew so changed, Peter had forgotten all about Samantha, the newly acquired wife deSolla had talked about in his letter.

'Where is she, Andrew? I'm dying to meet her . . .'

'She's very special,' Andrew said.

'She must be if she got through to you. Where is she?'

'She's in Little Lynn. Shopping, I expect. She's a very independent sort, and I still get very distracted by my work. But we're still . . .' He hesitated, a stray thought seeming to amuse him slightly. 'We're still very dependent upon each other in many ways.'

'Unbelievable . . .' Peter whispered, teasingly. During their later school days, and at university, Andrew had seemed mostly indifferent to women, as he seemed indifferent to most people. Girls were fascinated and attracted by his intensity, his moodiness, and his tall good looks. Because he didn't seem to care he had a succession of partners, including many of the most desirable in the university, all of them discarded after a few weeks. Peter, who chased girls with a frantic intensity inversely proportional to his success rate, watched the casual swathe cut by his friend with fascinated jealousy, and made sure to make himself available as often as possible as a shoulder

for distraught discards to cry on – a stratagem which accounted for most of his successes.

The idea of Andrew *marrying* someone seemed frankly impossible.

An uncomfortable silence began to develop. Misinterpreting Peter's train of thought, Andrew said, 'I'm sorry we didn't invite you to the wedding. It must seem terribly rude. It was just that it was such a spur-of-the-moment thing. We simply went into town and did it the same day. No relatives. Nothing. We had to drag in a couple of passers-by as witnesses. If we'd had a formal wedding I would have invited you both. And would've had you as my best man. You know that.'

'Of course,' Peter said reassuringly. 'I'm quite sure you would have done that. And what a speech I'd have made.' He smiled. 'The thing I'm finding hard to accept is simply the fact that you *are* married.'

'It seems odd to me, sometimes. But you only meet a woman like Samantha once in a lifetime.'

Andrew gave a peculiar little half-smile after he had spoken, and sat staring at his outspread hands. Peter noticed that his body was trembling slightly, as if he was suffering from some sort of Parkinsonism.

What had *happened* to Andrew deSolla? Peter found himself staring at his friend, still able to accept that this *was* a young man facing him, but totally discomforted by the wizened, almost deathly appearance of Andrew's body. Had he been like this when Samantha and he had married? In which case she was even more special than Andrew had made out. Or had the disease struck *after* their moment's happiness? And if so, what terrible strain had been placed upon their relationship in the last few months?

In any case, what sort of disease did *this* to a man? A parasite? Cancer? Andrew had been experimenting with drug-induced heightened states of consciousness. Drugs. Drugs could cause premature ageing. Was his work to blame, then? Is that why he had taken this remote house, in remote Cornwall?

Peter sipped his whisky, looking around the room as he did so. Part of him already wished that he hadn't come. This Andrew – sick, distracted, remote – made a painful contrast to

the memory of the friend with whom he had shared experiences, confidences, triumphs and disasters for a dozen years of adolescence and young adulthood.

Before the silence could lengthen again, he said, 'Well, anyway . . . fill me in on the last four years. How's the work been going? You *are* still working?'

'Certainly I'm still working. And it's going *remarkably* well, Peter. Remarkably well. You wouldn't believe some of the results I've had.'

'I never *did* believe most of the results you had, Andrew,' Peter said drily, and his friend laughed.

Andrew rose from his armchair and took Peter's glass to replenish it. 'I know you're sceptical about parapsychology. I'm tempted to say I can't blame you, but these days it's *you* who's in the minority. Besides, Carlyle's work was really very rigorous, absolutely sound methodology. Oxford would never have supported his research, otherwise.'

He came over and passed a fresh glass of Glen Morangie to his guest. Peter's head already felt slightly light.

'*And* we got results,' Andrew went on, as he sat down in the armchair again. '*I* got results. I have a talent, a psychic talent. Not a major one, nothing spectacular, but there's something there beyond simple coincidence. And with Geoffrey Carlyle I was able to work at it, develop it.' He raised his glass, a silent toast, and sipped the exquisite liquor. 'I was extremely lucky to be invited to work with him, Peter. There's no other word for it.'

'I'll look forward to seeing your results in *Nature* . . . or will you be unveiling them on *The Price is Right?*'

Andrew's face darkened. Peter realised that the easy sarcasm was inappropriate to their new, more distant relationship.

'I'm sorry. That's a cheap shot.'

Andrew sipped his Scotch and watched Peter through eyes that seemed to speak of a lifetime's study of human nature. They were full of amusement, and of wisdom, and of experience.

Twenty-five years old!

Peter had never been able to go along with his friend's

passionate interest in parapsychology, and Andrew's conviction that he possessed some minor form of psychic ability. It was certainly true that to play cards or scrabble with Andrew deSolla was a waste of time. Andrew always seemed to be able to pick the letters he needed, or block the moves of his opponent . . . and, in poker, he had an uncanny knack of folding his cards when appropriate, or raising and winning when mostly his cards were nothing more than a bluff hand.

And it was also true that there were times when he seemed to have had premonitions. He had refused to board the school bus, one day, and the bus had crashed, and two pupils had been killed. He had even been convinced that Peter had broken his shoulder bone, ice-skating. His concern – and his compensatory gift of a purloined half-bottle of brandy – were premature. By exactly one day. Peter *did* break his shoulder ice-skating, and the two of them had thought it almost hysterical that Andrew had guessed what was going to happen . . .

Hysterical, of course, because they were drunk as skunks on brandy, which is why Peter had skidded and slipped, and ended up in the local hospital's casualty ward.

Always, on any occasion when Andrew's damnable luck had come to the fore, Peter had felt that coincidence, luck and ordinary psychological skills provided a more probable explanation.

Nevertheless, the units where Andrew had studied and practised his research – first as an undergraduate at Sussex, and later, at the invitation of Professor Carlyle, at Oxford – seemed models of academic probity.

'You'll be convinced to believe in the paranormal before long, Peter. I promise you that.'

Peter smiled. 'We'll see.'

Andrew remained intense, almost worried. He had leaned forward in his chair, playing with his empty glass, watching Peter carefully. It was as if he had something on his mind, was wrestling with the decision to tell Peter something, or not to tell . . .

All very mysterious. Peter wished his friend would just relax, and stop behaving so peculiarly. But then, everything was peculiar about Andrew deSolla now.

Andrew said, 'Guessing which card is going to turn up next is only the beginning. The tiniest chink in the doorway. Carlyle has been blasting that door wide open.'

'The door to where?' Peter asked.

'To the other realm, where else? To the other side of the mind. To the other side of madness. To magic, the magic place. It's what I've always known, Peter . . .' His eyes, like fire, glowed in the face of many years; were younger, and yet older by far, than anything Peter had ever seen. To magic . . . the magic place . . .

'You mean paranormal powers. People with psychic talents . . .'

The room grew hot, uncomfortably hot. The silence was oppressive, just the sound of their breathing in the quiet, isolated room.

'So much more than that . . .' Andrew deSolla said softly. 'The realm is vast. Terrifying. There is so much to know, so much to discover; so much to learn to live with . . .'

'You're being mysterious, Andrew. Spell out what you're trying to say.'

But deSolla just smiled and shook his head. 'There will be time enough later on . . . how's that Scotch?'

'I'm fine. No more for me.'

Andrew had been on the verge of saying much more than he intended; that, at least, was Peter's impression of the last few seconds. And this was another dismaying reminder of the distance that had grown between them. In the old days Andrew would never have hesitated to share his research findings with him.

There was worse to come. And in a way, Peter had known it, had sensed it from the first moment of their meeting.

'When did this . . . whatever it is . . . this *disease!* When did it strike?'

Andrew said, 'About a year ago. I ignored it at first. I was too wrapped up in my work. And I'd just met Samantha. By the time I realised that something was seriously wrong it was too late. I was becoming as you see me now . . .'

After a moment's hesitation, Peter plunged in. 'Is it a drug? Are you addicted to a drug?'

Laughing: 'Yes and no. Not a drug. Addicted, yes. How perceptive of you.'

'It's no laughing matter, Andrew. How can you be so resigned?'

Suddenly slightly angry: 'Aren't you addicted to anything? Could you live without coffee? Can you get by without food?'

'Of course not.'

'Can you go three months without sex, and without whacking off to compensate?'

'Can a cat have fleas and not scratch? That's not addiction, that's necessity.'

Andrew deSolla laughed, and in a mock-German accent said, 'So, Mr Convay, you admit to being a vanker . . .'

Slumping back in his armchair, Peter shared the moment's humour, defeated by his friend. 'I'm sorry. I take the point. No drugs involved . . . and so . . . and so what? How *are* you now? Are you over the worst?'

The humour dissipated. In that fraction of a second the closeness that had returned between the two men went away again. Peter could not have imagined a more terrible moment, and even before Andrew spoke the words there were tears in his eyes.

Andrew said. 'I'm afraid not.' He stared at his glass, and in the cool light of the library his face seemed almost as grey as his hair. 'There's no easy way of saying this, so I'll say it straight out. There *is* no cure for what afflicts me. No remission. No pills, no surgery. No cold turkey. Nothing. I'll be dead within a year.'

Peter was stunned. The calm resignation with which deSolla announced the news was almost as shocking to Peter as the words themselves.

'This isn't true. Andrew, this can't be true.'

'It's true. Believe it. Make life easy for yourself.'

'No! I don't accept this. I can see that you're ill, but for . . .' Peter hesitated, wondering why his head was thumping, and his vision was blurring. It was anger. Perhaps angry sadness. It hit him like the storm winds of the night before. 'For *Christ's sake!* Don't be so bloody complacent! You're only twenty-five years old . . . there must be something you can try!'

'Look at me,' Andrew deSolla said simply, trying to mask the discomfort he felt at his friend's outburst. And *still* he was hiding something. '*Look* at me, Peter. I'm wasted. I'm lost. Physically. I'm a dying man; don't grieve, don't regret, just . . . just accept what I say, and accept, too, that I've asked you down here *because* I know the score, and because . . .' He was having difficulty with his words, and not because he didn't know *what* to say, but because he was uncertain how to say them.

He fixed Peter with a stare that was almost imploring. 'Because I wanted you to see me, and to see you . . . before . . . There is something that has to be done, something that has to be done because I love you, and am afraid for you.'

Afraid for me? What was he talking about, Peter wondered? But his own concern for his friend broke through first.

'Never mind me. There must be something you can try. You can't just sit down here in the back of beyond and die! Come to London. There must be specialists . . . treatments you could try. Andrew, there's no such thing as an incurable disease!'

'Is there not?' Andrew shook his head. 'I'm afraid you're wrong. There's no cure for what I've got. And if there was, I wouldn't take it now.'

Peter didn't understand that. He felt adrift, lost in the flow of Andrew's mysterious behaviour. 'Wouldn't take it? But you're only twenty-five years old, man! You can't just die. You've got your whole life in front of you. You've just got married, for God's sake. What about Samantha? What's she going to do?'

'Samantha . . . yes, Samantha.' Andrew gave that odd half-smile again. 'She knows. She understands.'

At that moment there was the sound of a key turning in the lock of the front door. Andrew reacted in a way that again Peter didn't fully understand. It wasn't a response of delight, nor one of fear, but rather . . . a little of both.

'Here she is now,' Andrew said. He climbed to his feet and called to Samantha. As Peter stood, he was aware that Andrew's frail body was shaking even more violently than before.

Samantha deSolla came into the room, brushing hair from her face in a tired, distracted way. She walked across to

Andrew and kissed him lightly on the cheek, then turned to Peter and offered her hand. 'I'm pleased to meet you, Peter. Andrew talks about you a lot.'

Peter took her hand – which was cool and damp with perspiration – and mumbled some automatic pleasantry, but his mind was numb. Even fully dressed there was no mistaking her abundant tumble of dark hair, and those curious mauve eyes . . .

It was Samantha deSolla he had seen making love to Flynn not an hour previously!

He looked keenly at her, but she showed no sign of recognising him, no evidence of embarrassment or guilt. Nor was there any remnant of the sexual energy which he had sensed before. Instead she looked pale, almost ashen, and beads of sweat stood out on her brow and around her lips.

Andrew looked at her, and then at Peter, and frowned slightly.

Peter said, 'I'm delighted to meet you,' and added, deliberately, 'Andrew tells me you've been shopping.'

Just the merest hint of a smile touched the beautiful woman's lips as she replied, 'That's right.' Her gaze was steady. Was she smiling because of the guilty secret she imagined no one shared, or because she had recognised Peter's little game and was rising to the bait?

As she moved past him to pour herself a small glass of soda water, her body smell drifted on the still air. Sensuous and strong, overwhelmingly sexual.

'I'm sorry,' she said, clutching her handbag and the glass of water. 'I'm really feeling sick. I'll have to go upstairs. You understand, Andrew.' Again the blazing, dark-eyed glance at him. 'I'll hope to see you later, Peter.'

She hurried out of the room, her thin dress slightly damp where it touched the full curve of her body. She had suddenly become like someone about to be sick.

Andrew deSolla turned away from the door, a slightly disappointed man, Peter thought. He smiled and shrugged. 'I'm sorry about that, Peter. She doesn't have a tremendously strong constitution. She's often sick, especially in hot weather.' He sat down calmly, and crossed his legs, staring up at his guest

quizzically. 'I hope you'll have a chance to get to know her later.'

Anger began to supplant the numbness in Peter Conway's mind.

I've already met your wife, he imagined himself saying. *While you were sitting here, dying, she was screwing a hotel manager in the overgrown part of your garden.*

His mind was a jumble of confused emotions, and he saw that his hand was shaking as he picked up the glass with the remnants of his whisky. He could not say anything to Andrew, but he could not endure the thought of his dying friend being so flagrantly cuckolded.

He gulped down his drink, his mind on fire. The room swam slightly, and he realised that he was getting drunk.

His expression must have given away something about his thoughts, because Andrew suddenly leaned forward very intensely and said, 'She means everything to me, Peter. You must understand that. Life wouldn't be worth living without her. It *is* worth living with her, even if it's only for a few months. Still,' he continued, more softly, speaking more to himself than to Peter, 'that's always the way of it. There's a price. There's always a price.'

Peter was thoroughly puzzled. How much did Andrew know? How much did he think that he – Peter – knew or had guessed? There seemed to be no way of pressing further without risking revealing things that might destroy his friend's happiness.

'Do you remember,' said Andrew suddenly, changing the subject in a very odd way, 'Do you remember when we made ourselves blood-brothers?'

Taken by surprise, for a moment Peter said nothing. Then he laughed. 'Of course I do. I still have the scar . . .' He held out his left hand, palm upwards, and indicated a faint white line of scar tissue at the base of his thumb. What was on Andrew's mind now, he wondered?

Andrew deSolla smiled, nodding as he remembered. 'You always overdid everything.'

They had been fifteen when the ritual had been proposed (Peter could no longer remember which of them had suggested

it . . . but then his head was so light, and his body feeling so strange, that he could hardly remember where he was at the moment . . .). It had been a games afternoon. They had dodged a cross-country run by slipping through a hedge and into a field while the teacher was showing off his paces at the front. Since the course looped back nearby, they would be able to rejoin the stragglers then. It was a dodge they used regularly, to the fury of some of the other games-hating boys who had to toil around the muddy course in exhaustion. What made it worse was that Peter and Andrew were perfectly capable of running; they just chose not to, and defied anyone to report them. Andrew's reputation for fighting was enough to ensure that they were not betrayed.

While they relaxed behind the hedge, taking turns to puff at a cigarette, Andrew produced his Swiss Army knife and began to play 'chicken', a test of nerve involving the stabbing of the blade between outstretched fingers.

When the suggestion that they should become blood-brothers had been made – and instantly agreed – Andrew quickly cut a delicate nick in his thumb, then passed the knife to Peter. Peter had been less adept in its use, and slashed harder than he had intended, opening a half-inch gash that bled copiously. They pressed the wounds together quickly, and murmured the ritual words (made up on the spot): 'Now we are of one blood, of one spirit and one destiny. Never let the bond be broken.'

Afterwards, Peter – feeling a little sick – had attempted to staunch the flow of blood with a grubby handkerchief. They returned to school and Peter's explanation ('Slashed it on a thorn, sir') was accepted by a somewhat sceptical master; he had been required to have a tetanus injection, which had hurt more than the knife cut.

Peter remembered these things, and stared at Andrew, through a muzzy veil of dizziness. Two Scotches! He had thought himself better able to take his drink.

Andrew said, 'Do you still feel bound by that bond of blood-brotherhood?' His voice was far away. Peter shook his head and tried to straighten up. The room shifted slightly.

'I've never really thought about it . . .' he said. 'But yes. In a

way I do. That's why I'm here. The bond has never broken. Not because of the blood, though. That was just a symbol . . .'

'One in blood, and in spirit and in destiny,' Andrew murmured, smiling slightly.

'Never let the bond be broken!' Peter concluded, but his tongue felt slurred and heavy.

Andrew said, 'The blood was a symbol. A ritual. But the bond was real, it existed and it still exists . . .'

What's going on? Why do I feel so odd? What's Andrew so obsessed about?

'". . . That's what ritual *is* all about. That's why all societies have rituals. That's why they're important. The bond exists in the *mind*. But it's real, tangible, *effective*.'

'Real, tangible, effective,' Peter repeated. 'Quite so. Andrew, I feel truly peculiar. What was in that bloody whisky? Blood-brother, bloody whisky . . .'

The room shifted again. Peter gripped the arms of his chair and tried to straighten up, but he failed. 'I think I'm going to be sick.'

'It's only Glen Morangie, but it would be a shame to waste it . . .'

'". . . going to be sick . . .'

'No you're not. Get a grip on yourself, Peter.'

Andrew loomed large over him, leaning down, his aged face close to Peter's pale, damp one. 'We have to renew that childish, childhood bond, Peter. We have to re-enact the ceremony. Do it over. Do it again.'

'Are you serious? A kid's game . . . just a kid's game . . .'

'But you said you still felt bound by the brotherhood.'

'. . . kid's game . . .' Peter slurred. He felt suddenly quite frightened. What was happening to him? Why was Andrew suddenly so menacing? The old man swayed above him, his breath a strangely sharp, herbal scent in Peter's nostrils.

'Don't ask me to explain, Peter. Just do it as a favour to a dying man. There's no harm. But it's a very appropriate thing to do. Things have changed in my life, and in your life, and the bond has weakened. But I must *protect* you, Peter, and I know the real way of doing it . . .'

'Cut our thumbs. Press them together. Get blood poisoning . . .'

The words that he spoke were like distant echoes. Andrew deSolla straightened, smiled, helped Peter to his feet.

'Take your jacket and shirt off.'

Peter obeyed without hesitation, even though his mind was reeling, and questioning, and a large part of him was beginning to comprehend that somehow Andrew had control over him.

At Andrew's instructions he went over to the masterpiece, and braced against the lintel. The room was hot, and his bare flesh oozed sweat, which tickled as it ran down his skin and gathered at his trouser belt.

'What's going on, Andrew? This isn't thumbs . . .'

'Not thumbs,' Andrew deSolla agreed. In the ornate gilt mirror over the fireplace the image of Andrew had become more threatening. Peter watched as his friend unwrapped a small, black silk package. He withdrew a white-handled knife. Peter could see that the blade had various designs engraved upon its flashing silver metal.

'Andrew, I don't like this . . . Andrew . . . what the hell are you doing, Andrew?'

I can't move. I can't move!

'It's going to hurt, but it won't poison you. It's for your own safety, Peter. Believe me, it's for your own good. It will hurt, but it may well save you a greater pain.'

'Blood-brothers,' Peter murmured as Andrew approached.

'One blood, one spirit, one destiny . . .' Andrew breathed and added, 'I shan't let it get you. This at least I can do for you. Hold still!'

Peter braced himself against the mantlepiece and closed his eyes. The knife cut into his shoulder and he gasped with the sudden cold, raw pain. 'Christ!'

'Hold still!'

Instead of making a simple nick, Andrew seemed to be inscribing something in his flesh. As the edge of the blade parted the skin, as the warm blood flooded down his back, Peter felt his legs go weak. Only by the greatest effort of will could he remain standing. The pain was unbelievable, as

though a red-hot point was being drawn across his back, even though the metal was cold . . .

Suddenly it was too much. He flung himself upright, watching the peculiarly distorted image of Andrew in the mirror. 'Enough! For God's sake, Andrew, *enough!*'

'*Be still!*' Andrew replied, in a voice of such unexpected, vibrant power that Peter froze immediately. There were some further quick strokes of the knife, then Andrew withdrew a white cloth and placed it on the wound.

'There. It's done. They are only shallow cuts: the bleeding will stop in a minute. But the marks won't go.'

Andrew sheathed the knife, replaced it in the black silk binding and walked back to the sofa.

Peter reached over to rub the sticky, painful wound. *I must be mad,* he thought, but still he was dizzy, still he felt that, somehow, he was not totally in control of either his body or his mind. He turned so that his back was to the mirror, and stared at the reflection of his shoulders. Drawn – or rather *carved* – on his back was a raw-red symbol he did not recognise. It was a straight horizontal line, with a simple scroll pattern at either end. In the centre had been cut three vertical arrows. As he looked, so more bright blood welled up from the slashes, and ran down his smeared, brutalised flesh.

He dabbed the cloth back at the cuts.

'I'll be scarred for life! It's as bad as a tattoo!'

'It'll be something to remember me by,' Andrew said mildly.

Angrily, Peter forced himself to turn back to his friend. He stepped into the room and swayed, then reached for the back of an armchair and steadied himself.

'Right, you knife-happy bastard! When do I get to return the favour?'

'You don't,' Andrew said. 'It's too late for me. I should have done it years ago . . . things might have been different then.'

Peter Conway stood, half-naked and in pain, and stared at his bizarre friend through a haze of alcohol, discomfort and irritation.

He suddenly realised that he was desperately hungry.

'At the risk of sounding offensive,' he said weakly, 'Andrew, what you're saying makes no sense whatever.'

'No. It wouldn't. I'm sorry, Peter. I'm not crazy, and I'm not stupid. This may all be pointless. I hope so. But if not, you'll have cause to thank me. One day.'

'Will I indeed,' Peter muttered, steadying himself. He straightened up again, and smiled, then moaned. 'I'm going to faint. It's undignified. It's embarrassing. But unless I get some food soon, I'm truly going to faint. Whatever that whisky was, it wasn't whisky.' He swallowed heavily, feeling the sweat break out on his face, and the blood begin to drain from his head. 'And if it was,' he added, 'Then remind me . . . never . . . to visit Scotland with a native . . .'

Chapter Three

Peter Conway lay awake in his room at the Bay View Hotel, tired but unable to sleep, his mind running over the day's events.

He had refused Andrew's offer to stay the night, even though it had seemed rude to do so. He had made the excuse that all his luggage was still at the hotel and that all the whisky had made him too drunk to be the sort of guest he cared to be.

He also invoked Gabrielle Danton's name as an 'extra' reason to return to the hotel, but noted well how disturbed Andrew seemed either by the implied information in the statement, or by the lie that he had discerned.

The truth was that he found his sick friend's appearance – and the knowledge of his impending death – too upsetting, while the presence of Samantha deSolla deeply disturbed him. He was also convinced that Andrew had 'spiked' the whisky, making Peter vulnerable to his masochistic renewal of their childhood bond. His shoulder ached, and now that a clear head and full rationality had returned, he felt not a little angry at Andrew's callous abuse of him.

He was afraid that Andrew, in whatever mental state he now lurked, might try something even more bizarre, and painful, during the night ahead. So he had returned to the Bay View Hotel and checked in for a second night.

He thought back to the afternoon and evening of the unexpectedly violent day.

After the incomprehensible, and painful, ritual, Andrew had fallen into a reminiscent mood, talking endlessly about adventures they had shared as boys, friends they had known at college, all manner of experiences. Peter enjoyed talking over old times as much as anyone, but after a while he started to feel

uncomfortable, a sensation which worsened when he identified its source.

It was that Andrew's flow of talk reminded him of his grandmother, who in her senility would ramble endlessly about childhood experiences. Samantha had joined them for dinner, but had said little. In other circumstances Peter might have enjoyed the food and the succession of fine wines that Andrew produced from his cellar, but he ate and drank without really being conscious of what he was consuming. He was nervous of the effect of alcohol upon him, now. And nervous of the couple with whom he dined.

When it came time to go, Andrew slipped a small white envelope into Peter's coat pocket. 'Don't open it until you're back in London. Promise me?'

'I promise. But you shouldn't give cheques for so much money . . .'

Andrew laughed mildly. 'If you *are* short of cash just let me know.'

Embarrassed at the way his joke had turned on him, Peter said, 'Thanks. But I'm fine.'

'Then just do that little thing for me. Open it in London, and obey every command that is given within.'

'Yes, Master . . .' Peter intoned, and then embraced his old friend, before turning into the darkness and walking back to the hotel.

The drink had made him more emotional than usual. As he walked he found that tears were running down his cheeks. Peter had promised to visit again, soon, but the fact of the matter was: both of them knew that they would never meet again, at least, not in this life.

Now the envelope lay on a chest of drawers beside his bed, a pale rectangle visible in the moonlight that filtered through the curtains. Part of him wanted to abide by Andrew's injuction to leave it intact until he returned to London. Andrew was right. There was a bond. He could not disobey his friend's parting wish . . .

But part of him wanted to tear it open there and then, in the hope that it might explain Andrew deSolla's behaviour, his illness (about whose details he remained vague) and his relationship with his wife.

After an hour of agonising, he reached for the envelope, and with two swift motions had opened it.

Its contents were not wildly exciting.

I'm not mad, Peter. I love you as a friend. I took a great chance in inviting you down here. But I had to do it. I'm dying. You know that. Remember me affectionately. In hell, that may be my only saving grace.

Peter. When I die you are sure to hear of it. DO NOT COME TO THE FUNERAL. Remember me fondly, and youthfully. Allow me a final dignity. Don't come. Don't let Mary come. If you see her, give her three kisses for me. Total length three hours. Bodily position at your discretion, and her agreement.

Those were the days! Oh youth. Oh sun. Oh random kissing!

Remember all that, and stay away from Penthor. Please!

Your friend in blood, spirit and destiny. Andrew.

Later, as Peter lay, drifting towards sleep, he was pulled back to wakefulness by a series of shuddering female cries, which appeared to be coming from along the corridor. There was pain in them, and desolation . . . and loathing.

Peter sat up in bed, listening hard, both disturbed and aroused by the sounds, which in a way echoed the erotic sounds he had heard in deSolla's garden that afternoon. He knew at once who it was experiencing the pain and the pleasure, and he felt his body respond with arousal and envy.

The woman's cries turned away from being a sound that represented an uncontrollable response to violent thrusting, and became instead an expression of sorrow and horror. Puzzled, Peter climbed out of bed and went to his door, listening to the corridor outside.

Footsteps sounded, a man going quickly and lightly by, in the direction of the stairwell. Peter opened the door to his room and peered into the dimly lit passageway outside. A young man, of tall stature, and with fair hair, was just about to descend to the lower floor. He was quite naked, and his body glistened with sweat. He held his clothes over one arm as he walked.

At the top of the stairs he turned slightly, and Peter was astonished by his similarity of looks to Samantha deSolla.

Then he remembered that Samantha's brother, Daniel, was living at Sele House as well, even though he was a relative stranger to the place. If this was, indeed, Daniel, then as a man he in every way complemented the beauty of his sister. His body was tight and hard, the muscles pronounced but not developed. His stomach was flat, and the dark length of his penis was a distinct and still partially erect shadow in the night-time illumination.

His eyes sparkled. Peter drew back, afraid that he would be seen, and the feeling he had was the same as that afternoon when, voyeuristically indulging himself by witnessing this young man's sister in full copulatory splendour, he had imagined himself observed, perceived, his voyeurism almost welcomed.

Daniel – if indeed it *was* Daniel – vanished from sight, and Peter heard the sound of his departure, a discreet opening and closing of the front door of the hotel.

Somewhere a woman sobbed.

Peter stepped out into the corridor again and walked along it, away from the stairs. There was a door open, and light spilling from within. He cautiously approached it, peered round, and observed what was occurring within.

Gabrielle Danton was across the room, bent over the washbasin, retching violently. She was totally naked, and ordinarily Peter would have been aroused by the sight of her heavy, slightly pendulous breasts, and her full thighs. Now, though, her appearance was anything but erotic. She was covered in slick sweat, pale and shaking as she sobbed and gagged. He could see red weals and scratches on her back. There was blood on the inside of her legs.

But more offensive than any of this was the slick pool of dark liquid that was slowly forming on the plastic matting below her, an oily exudate from her body that was revolting to observe, and which seemed to be hot, from the steam that it was giving off.

Gabrielle Danton was completely oblivious of his presence, and he stood awkwardly, not knowing what to say or do.

Suddenly he found himself pushed roughly aside.

Flynn shouldered his way past him, his face flushed and angry. 'Go back to your room, Mr Conway,' he said. 'This is none of your concern.'

'I'm sorry. I heard someone cry out . . .'

'Go back to your room!' The man almost shouted the words, and as he did so, he closed the door of Gabrielle's room, shutting Peter out.

Interlude

There was someone in the room with him. He had heard the door open and close softly, but was almost too tired to open his eyes and see who it was.

'Samantha? Is that you?'

There was just silence. Not even the sound of breathing. It might have been a still summer's day beyond the heavy drape curtains, or it might have been the dead hours of morning. Andrew deSolla didn't know. He no longer cared.

With great effort he parted his eyelids, and peered into the gloom. There was someone by the door, someone in the corner, resting against the wall, watching him.

'Samantha . . .?'

'It's Daniel.'

The young man's voice was soft, cold. Andrew felt a wave of disappointment. He let his eyes drift closed again, and relaxed in his wide, cocooning bed.

'I hoped it would be Samantha,' he whispered. 'I hoped she would come.'

'A few hours,' Daniel said. 'I'll send her to you.' He laughed and pushed himself away from the door, stepping from the dark shadow into the dim, red light of Andrew's night-lamp. Andrew watched him carefully, feigning more weariness than he actually felt. Daniel's face glistened in the red light. He wore pale-coloured trousers, but no shirt. His body was alive with strength, and he seemed almost to taunt the frail, decrepit corpse of the man in the bed. He watched Andrew through eyes that glowed an eerie purple.

'So this is how it ends,' he whispered, in a voice that cut like ice. 'Maggot-ridden and disgusting, useless to us, but trapping us endlessly.'

'Not endlessly,' Andrew murmured. 'Not necessarily . . .'

'There's no way out,' Daniel breathed. He was angry. The strange glow in his eyes made the hostility of his words more intense. He asked, 'Are you in pain?'

'Considerable. Do you care?'

'Not in the slightest. Do you need water?'

'No. Not water.'

'Syrup?'

'Not syrup.'

'What then? Why did you call?'

Andrew lay staring at the ceiling, the shifting, crawling agonies in his body sending a charge of electric shock through every limb. But he breathed easily, and his mind was clear. This would be the way. There would be death of sorts, but not peace . . .

'Samantha,' he whispered. 'I want to see her. How long before she comes back?'

'A few hours.'

'I can't wait a few hours. The time has to be now.'

Daniel watched him curiously, head cocked to one side like a bird of prey. 'The time for *what* is now . . .?'

With a quick smile, and lowering his gaze to survey the glistening, arrogant young man at the foot of the bed, Andrew said, 'For death, Daniel. For release. For me at least.'

Daniel laughed. It was a bitter sound, completely without humour. He shook his head. 'No death for you, old man. There is always a price. You knew that. You'll lie there rotting. The flesh will disolve, you'll live and fester in pools of your own excreta, the worms will thrive in you . . . but you won't die. You can't. You should have known. You should have remembered . . .'

'But I can, Daniel. I can. I've found the way.'

Andrew could feel the sudden tension in the young man. In the faint glow that pervaded the bed area of the room, Daniel seemed to straighten up, to broaden, to become less handsome, more hideous, more malevolent.

'How?'

'You,' Andrew said. '*You* can do it. I don't know the hour, I don't even know the date, but I know what *day* it is today. I can feel it. You can dispatch me, Daniel. You can end this misery.'

Daniel grinned. His face was like a glowing skull. 'But I don't *want* to end your misery,' he whispered. 'Why would I want to do that? Why would I want to end it for you when that would end it for me as well? I *like* it here, Andrew. I don't *want* to go . . .'

'Samantha does . . .' Andrew reminded him.

'But Samantha isn't here.'

With all his strength Andrew pushed his body away from the bed, and propped himself on his elbows. The two men, both young, but one a hideously fleshed skeleton rotted with age, stared at each other. They were master and servant, and the power of that relationship still existed, masked though it was by the physical superiority of the man called Daniel.

Andrew deSolla said, 'You've forgotten the rule, Daniel.'

'The rule?'

'Of succession.'

Daniel said nothing for a moment, then frowned. 'Succession . . .' he repeated, and turned away from the bed. He walked quickly to the draped window and pulled back the curtains. Dark night was broken by a few bright stars. It was after midnight.

Andrew watched him, increasingly uncomfortable with the weight of his body on his frail arms. He felt sick. He felt frightened. He couldn't go on like this . . . and yet, he faced an eternity of this awful existence.

'Help me die, Daniel,' he urged. 'It will *free* you, not trap you. It will free you to decide for yourselves! This is the day for it, Daniel. I've studied the old works. I've read Carlyle's notes. I swear to you - give me release and your lives will be in your own hands . . .'

Daniel stared at him, his purple gaze like a dual beacon of distrust. Andrew hoped that he was not giving himself away. If only it had been Samantha. If only *she* were here . . .

Release me, he urged silently, and added, release me and yes, you'll be free of me, free to make choices. For a few weeks. And then you'll be puffed out like a candle. Snatched away. Damn your eyes, Daniel, do you think I would die knowing that *you* would really survive after me?

'Succession . . .' Daniel repeated.

'Kill me,' Andrew urged. 'Kill me and know a freedom you've *never* known.'

Kill me and feel what it's like to have your body slowly consumed by fire!

Daniel came back to the bed, looking down at Andrew deSolla, who collapsed back against the sheets, and sighed. With relief. Daniel had believed him.

'You know what to do,' he said. 'You know the way . . .'

Daniel reached out and touched Andrew's eyes. Then he walked quickly across the room, touched something on the wall and stepped into the dark passage that was revealed suddenly from behind the shelving. A moment later he returned, carrying the gleaming, two-pronged fork that symbolised their relationship.

Andrew waited, watching the ceiling. He could feel Daniel hesitate.

Goodbye Samantha, he thought silently. *I'm sorry it had to be him and not you . . .*

He had thought that Daniel would wait a moment, would say something, would ask if Andrew wished to give a message to his wife, or make a last wish, or just exchange a word or two of farewell.

But Daniel had no heart. The young man suddenly stepped rapidly across the room and drove the fork into Andrew deSolla's skull, piercing his eyes with the prongs, and forcing the weapon so far down that the sharpened points cracked the occipital bone and impaled the old man on his pillow.

Chapter Four

Mary Conway heard the church bell begin to toll before she caught sight of the building itself. The sound rolled across the still September air, heavy and mournful. She tried to increase her pace, but the new black shoes which she had bought for the occasion pinched her feet, and were beginning to rub up blisters on her heels.

She glanced at her watch: a minute past midday. She was going to be late, but at least she would not miss the entire ceremony.

The hedgerow gave way to a set of decrepit iron railings beyond which, through a stand of trees, she could see the grey stone mass of Penthor Church. A hundred yards further on Mary came to the lychgate. As she turned into it she saw to her surprise that hanging from the lintel were a pair of black crucifixes. She reached up and touched one. It was light, and swung away easily under her touch. She saw that it was made of some kind of stiff fabric, wound into a cross-shape in a way that reminded her of the reed crosses she had waved, as a child, on Palm Sunday.

As she hurried up the gravel path she became aware of a lighter note underlying the reverberating peals of the church bell. It seemed to come from either side of her, and as she emerged into the graveyard she looked about her. She was surprised to see that at the four corners of the graveyard stood men holding handbells, which they tolled in unison. The men were dressed in black, naturally enough, but she could not tell whether she recognised anybody because they were facing outwards, their backs to the church and graveyard.

She could see the grave away to her left: a dark rectangle with a heap of earth draped in sheets of green artificial grass to

one side. It was separated from the rest of the cemetery by a wide black ribbon, which bordered it on three sides. On the nearside this ribbon was extended in two parallel lines towards the church porch, defining an avenue from church to grave. She also noticed that the ribbon path went on to encircle the church itself.

Knowing little of funerary customs, Mary was puzzled by this, and even slightly disturbed. In remote rural areas, elements of older rituals were still sometimes joined on to Christian services. She knew that well enough. But the ribbon path was sinister. It made her shiver to look at it. The part she found most odd was that the ribbon was supported by a series of cleft sticks. They looked like ordinary garden canes with their tops split, but were painted black. Where the path crossed the main thoroughfare from the church porch, two small metal bowls had been placed. They contained incense of some sort, and were smouldering. The air was fragrant with their scent.

The church door was closed, and Mary could hear the droning inflections of the priest dimly through its thick oak. She turned the heavy iron ring and gingerly pulled the door open, trying to be silent, but the only effect of her care was to prolong the loud creaking of the hinges.

Wincing with embarrassment, she crept inside and perched at the end of the nearest pew, bowing her head a moment in polite reverence. As she stared down at the hymn book and Bible in the rack in front of her, and inhaled the familiar church smell of dust and old furniture polish, she became aware that she could not understand a word that the priest was saying.

A moment more, and she realised that it was because he was speaking in Latin.

Funny, she thought. *I didn't think even Catholics used Latin these days.*

Mary sat up and looked about her. The vicar stood at his lectern, which took the form of an eagle with half-spread wings. He was dressed in a simple black cassock. The pews were almost empty. Peter, she saw, was in the second row, on the other side of the aisle. In the front row, directly in front of Mary, was a dark-haired woman, whom she immediately guessed must be Samantha.

Otherwise the congregation consisted of a half-dozen stony-faced men sitting at the outer end of six pews in the middle of the church. There were no other relatives, no friends. And, oddest of all, not even Samantha's brother Daniel, whom Peter had mentioned in his letter to her.

Daniel. Tall, blond and beautiful.

She had been quite looking forward to meeting him.

Although it was a bright day outside, the interior of the church was chilly and dim: the dusty windows seemed to hold the sunlight in check, rather than admit it.

The coffin stood in the centre aisle, in front of an altar draped in black cloth. It was closed. Mary looked at it, picturing Andrew deSolla's body lying, pale and stiff in death, just inside its walnut walls. Emotion welled in her throat, and she felt the pricking of tears behind her eyes. Andrew had always been closer to Peter than to her, and she had never quite been able to understand the close bond between her cousin and a man she had often found aloof and dismissive. But they had spent many hours together, many days, the three of them, and she could scarcely believe, or accept, that Andrew was gone.

Peter had told her of deSolla's illness, of course, but the Andrew she visualised was the one she had known: strong, clever, and very alive. He was the first acquaintance of her generation to die, and sitting there, staring at his coffin, she felt a chill intimation of her own mortality.

'. . . *in Nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti* . . .'

The half-familiar words, followed by an 'Amen' which drew muttered echoes from the tiny congregation, jerked her attention back to the service. The vicar walked from his lectern, past the coffin, and stood in the aisle. The six men rose from their seats, walked to the front of the church and took up position as pallbearers, three to each side of the coffin.

Without ceremony they hoisted it onto their shoulders and followed the priest as he moved off towards the door. As he approached Mary she saw that he carried a small censer, which he swung to either side as he walked. A smell filled her nostrils: not the heavy sweetness of incense but something bitter and acrid. The priest walked past her without in any way acknowledging her presence.

The church bell began to toll again.

Samantha stood up and slowly turned to follow the coffin. Mary saw that she was clad in a heavy black veil, through which her face could hardly be seen. She walked slowly, almost with difficulty, as if she were feeling faint. As she passed Mary she turned to look in her direction. Mary *felt* the intensity of her gaze, even though her eyes were mere shadows behind the veil. It seemed to paralyse Mary, fixing her to the spot, draining her of strength. She found herself breathing heavily, as if to stop herself fainting. She felt there was something indefinably strange, subtly *wrong*, about the other woman.

What was it? Nothing she could articulate; it was something to which her body responded on an instinctual level . . .

Then Samantha passed; there was a waft of curious perfume, and the feeling of weakness went away. Once it had gone it seemed absurd, some crossed wire in her nervous system responding faultily to her grief.

Peter, her cousin, was following Samantha at a distance of three or four yards. Mary stood up and fell in beside him. She could tell he was angry with her for being late, and her own annoyance blossomed in response.

'Where have you *been?*' he whispered irritably.

'Don't start on me now,' she muttered back darkly. 'It's a wonder I made it at all. The train was late. There were no taxis. I had to get a bus and walk from the other side of Penthor, and my shoes are killing me. My luggage is still at the bus station, if it hasn't been stolen.'

They walked a few paces in fuming silence, then glanced at each other, and each smiled.

Peter said, 'I didn't mean to snap. I'm sorry. I just wished you were here earlier. I'm not very good at funerals.'

Mary smiled reassuringly. How pale he seemed, she thought. How drawn and tired. In the months since she had last seen him he appeared to have lost some weight. She felt a surge of affection, and reached out to squeeze his hand. 'I'm sorry too. Let's not quarrel, Peter.'

'No. That would be silly. I'm glad you made it, anyway.' He gave her a tired smile, and squeezed her hand quickly in response.

As they emerged from the porch into sunlight, which was hot and blinding after the dim coolness of the church, they saw that the main party were already circling the church along the odd ribbon pathway. They hurried after them.

'What's all this about, I wonder?' Mary said. And pointed, as well, at the distant bell-ringers, their backs still turned to the church.

'Local idiocy?' Peter ventured. 'Andrew was not a local man. Maybe they suspect him of witchcraft, or something. And look at that . . .'

As they came round the back of the church they saw two tethered roosters. The proud animals were silent, but were so close together that every few seconds they flapped angrily at each other, and feathers flew.

They reached the graveside and spread out around the dark pit. The pallbearers placed the coffin on wooden planks laid crosswise across the grave, dropping the heavy box with a thump for the last few inches. Four of them took hold of ropes and bore the weight of the coffin again as the others drew away the planks. The body was lowered into the earth quickly and without ceremony.

The handbells were rung. The two cocks made loud, angry noises, then fell silent.

As Peter and Mary peered over the graveside they saw the lid of the coffin clearly for the first time. Mary was surprised to see a heavy-looking brass crucifix nailed into the wood.

The priest began to read through the burial service, speaking swiftly and tonelessly, as if he was anxious to finish and be away. Mary was shocked at how perfunctory it all seemed. There had been no word about Andrew deSolla as a man: for all the personal element in the service he might have been an unidentified corpse washed ashore in Penthor harbour.

Even as the priest was speaking his last 'Amen', the pallbearers began to shovel earth into the grave. As they did so, the priest leaned forward. He withdrew a small bottle from a pocket hidden somewhere in the folds of his robes and sprinkled holy water on to the coffin and its thin covering of earth.

Samantha stood motionless by the graveside, her head

slightly bowed. Mary looked sideways at Peter, and saw that although his face betrayed no emotion, there were wet tracks of tears on his cheeks. She thought again of Andrew, alive and laughing; Andrew as a teenager, cycling on the Sussex downs with Peter and herself, his bony legs pumping as he easily outdistanced them in an impromptu sprint; Andrew, his ginger hair now long and wavy, shaking his head in time to the deafening music at a Who concert they had all attended; Andrew once, when drunk, trying arrogantly to seduce her at a party, and when she refused casually picking up the most attractive girl in the room, to prove he didn't care, didn't need *her* . . .

Andrew, the next day, apologising for being such a prick, and filling her room with hundreds of flowers that he had stolen from the nearby park.

Then she thought of Andrew, still and lifeless beneath the earth, his flesh falling away to reveal the skeleton it had always concealed. She felt tears running down her own face.

What a waste it all was. How pointless it all was, when all too quickly this was how it ended.

Mary still couldn't understand how it had ended so swiftly for Andrew, how in the four years since they'd last met (four years in which she'd known, of course, that they'd be together again soon, the three of them, and it would be like old times) he had withered and died like a diseased tree . . .

Mary heard footsteps crunching on the gravel behind her, but while she was still registering the sound she was pushed brusquely to one side. A woman marched past her. She was middle-aged and attractive, dressed smartly in a two-piece dark red suit.

The woman walked quickly up to Samantha. Without a word she reached into her handbag, drew something out which gleamed in the sunlight, and stabbed at Samantha's face with it. Samantha reacted instantly, reaching up to grab the woman's wrist. They stood for a moment in trembling equilibrium, and Mary could see that the weapon was a wooden crucifix, sharpened at one end. Then two of the pallbearers moved quickly to restrain Samantha's attacker.

'Not here. Not like this . . .' one of them whispered.

'Now!' the woman shouted.

'Lucy, no!'

The two men dragged her back. Lucy struggled with them for a moment, before giving up the unequal contest. Samantha turned away and walked quickly past Peter and Mary, not acknowledging them in the slightest. Mary turned to watch her move quickly along the path to the churchyard gate.

'Bitch!' Lucy cried, her voice shockingly loud in the quiet graveyard. 'I know what you are, bitch!'

Samantha gave no sign of having heard the other woman's outburst, and quickly disappeared beyond the gate.

The pallbearers returned to their work, shovelling earth into the grave. Lucy stood silently watching them. The slow tolling of the bell continued, like an eerie heartbeat.

'Let's go,' Peter said, and Mary nodded. But just as they made to move away from the graveside, the woman, Lucy, turned on them.

'You're one of them!' she said loudly. Peter stopped and watched her. Her face was twisted with a mixture of anger and fear, he thought; anger in the mouth . . . fear in the eyes. She came up to him, searching his face as if some truth about him was revealed there.

'Who are you?' Peter asked slowly, and Mary reached out and took his arm.

'You were here in spring,' Lucy said. 'I saw you in the town. I saw you in the hotel. You were here, you went to the house . . .'

'Lucy . . .' the priest said, and reached out to touch her shoulder. She shrugged off his hand, and a feral look came into her eyes as she stepped closer to Peter. 'You're *one* of them!'

'I'm a friend . . . I *was* a friend . . . of Andrew deSolla's. If that makes me "one of them" then I'm proud and pleased to be so.'

Her hand slapped out, and only his excellent reflexes enabled Peter to avoid the blow.

'He didn't have any friends!' Lucy shouted, as the priest dragged her away more violently than perhaps was normal for a man of the cloth. 'You get out of Penthor. Both of you! Or you'll stay behind like *he* did. Get out of our town. Leave us alone!'

Two of the men who had carried deSolla's coffin escorted Lucy gently but firmly to the lych-gate. The priest watched her go, then turned and stared uncomfortably at Peter for a moment. Mary stood beside him, tense and unhappy.

The priest came over. 'I recognise you, now. The storm. The yacht that was washed up. You were taking photographs.'

'None of them turned out,' Peter said. Memory of that stormy night came back vividly. But before he could ask any more, the priest said, 'I'm sorry about Lucy. She hated the deSollas.'

'So I gather. What did they do to her?'

The priest stared hard at Peter for a moment, with the nervous, quick look of a bird. 'That's hard to say,' he murmured. 'Andrew deSolla was a very solitary man. His wife is a very beautiful woman. Lucy Trevithick's marriage has not been the easiest of partnerships – perhaps an answer to her hostility will emerge from that . . .'

Peter sensed the lie, but didn't know how to refute it. He said, 'It seems rather odd, then, that she should be angry with Andrew . . .'

'Lucy is our problem,' the priest said curtly. 'I apologise for her behaviour. But I suggest that you leave Penthor as soon as you're ready. This is not a happy town, Mr Conway.' He looked at Mary. 'I don't know who you are, but please accept my apologies as well. If you are friends of Andrew deSolla's you at least had the right to mourn him with dignity.'

He walked past them and into the church.

Mary led Peter back to the road, tugging him to prevent him from pursuing the priest and challenging him further. 'I haven't seen you for ages, Peter. Come on. There's a lot to catch up on. A lot of news . . .'

Peter gave up the struggle. At the lych-gate he stopped again and glanced back at the church.

To his surprise he noticed that the pallbearers had ceased to fill in the grave, and were now dusting off their hands and walking – and laughing as they walked - into the porch.

Chapter Five

They fetched Mary's suitcase from the tiny, ramshackle shelter that passed as a bus station, and walked back through the town towards the sea. They walked arm in arm, but said little to each other. The funeral and, more specifically, the death of their friend, had cast a cloud over their joy at seeing each other again. And the strange behaviour of Lucy Trevithick had left a rather unpleasant feeling about the day's events.

The streets of the town were deserted, though the shops were still open. It was sunny, and quite warm still. Peter had the uncanny feeling that the funeral had had a more wide-ranging effect that just upon himself and his cousin . . .

And of course, Samantha.

The only people they saw as they walked the streets, and came to the harbour road, were the men who had carried Andrew's coffin. All of them stopped talking as Peter and Mary Conway passed, and watched them, but none of them returned Peter's acknowledgement.

At the Bay View Hotel, Mary's mood brightened. Now that she could see the ocean the pall of gloom lifted. She stood on the edge of the steep bank that dropped down to the nearer shore, and the concreted walls of the outer quays, and let the wind tug at her hair and her clothes.

'This is *beautiful!*' she enthused. Peter stood behind her, watching her, feeling a great warmth, a great affection for her. The sun was quite low, and still very bright. It gave her clothing a translucent quality that he found appealing. Her body was a dark shadow inside the flapping fabric of her dress, and he liked her slimness, remembered their adolescent encounters, the feel of her taut limbs as she and he – and usually Andrew – had wrestled in simulated combat . . . or had it been sex?

'We ought to check you in. They might let the adjoining room . . .'

'Let's stay for a few days,' Mary said. She turned from the wide sea, running her hands through her wind-blown hair. Her face was radiant, her smile wide and beautiful.

'You are a *lovely* creature . . .' Peter said, as he picked up her case again.

'Less of that. *Cousin*.' She said. 'Anyway, you're not so bad yourself. Keeping fit. Not too paunchy.'

'I don't eat anything but Chinese takeaways,' he said, and she took his arm as they walked the few yards more to the hotel's glass-fronted door.

'I'm going to miss Andrew,' Mary said. 'But perhaps . . . perhaps if every time we come here we just . . . I don't know . . . if we just live, and love, and laugh, and remember . . . perhaps that'll keep his memory alive for us. We should make it a routine to come here. I've never seen anywhere quite so lovely.'

Peter almost had to drag her inside. She tugged back, still enjoying the tranquillity, and the wideness of the view, the sun setting the still Atlantic waters to all sorts of fire and colour.

When Peter had checked in to the hotel that morning he had been nervous, almost embarrassed. He had been in two minds about coming back here at all. The memory of Gabrielle Danton's nude, violated body, and of Flynn's anger at his voyeurism, had been powerful inducements to find accommodation in the Harbour Hotel, or the Red Lion. Perversely – and that was perhaps (he acknowledged) the correct word – they had been inducements to return. He had smiled at Gabrielle, and watched her eyes for any flicker of recognition, but though she remembered him, she remembered him only vaguely. And she made no sign of knowing that he had witnessed her distress after the forcible and clearly unwelcome intercourse that Samantha's brother had enjoyed with her.

Daniel . . .

Daniel hadn't been at the funeral. How odd. It was only now that Peter thought about it, registered the fact. He had never met Daniel, indeed, he had no sure evidence that the naked man in the Bay View that night of six months ago had even

been Samantha's brother. He had based his assumption solely upon the resemblance between the man and the woman. He had nothing else to go on.

He shrugged it off. It was surely not important. If Andrew and Daniel had not been the best of friends, then perhaps there was a perfectly reasonable explanation for the young man's absence from the graveside.

It was Flynn who accepted the registration of Mary Conway. And if Gabrielle had not appeared to remember Peter's presence on that night in April, Flynn certainly did. He scowled at Peter, and treated Mary with a coolness bordering on rudeness. He asked how long they would be staying. When Peter answered, 'A day or two,' Flynn retorted, 'If that's so, then please remember that in this hotel there's your rooms and our rooms . . .'

It was a pointed, deliberate, and hostile comment, and Peter cautiously acknowledged it as he led Mary upstairs.

He had booked adjoining rooms. With the door open between them, they both attended to unpacking and changing, though Mary talked ten to the dozen, about Andrew, about Penthor, and about the odd event at the funeral.

'Andrew *must* have been her lover . . .'

'Whose?' Peter retorted, sitting on his bed and changing the film in his camera.

'Lucy's. That woman's.'

Astonished, Peter said, 'What on earth makes you say that?'

'Female intuition. She was broodingly jealous of Samantha, his wife. Typical mistress reaction.'

'Would *you* screw Lucy, if you had a wife like Samantha?'

There was the sound of clothing being unpacked, and zippers being unzipped. Mary rattled about among the coat-hangers in her tiny wardrobe.

'Maybe she was frigid.'

'Maybe. But you didn't see Andrew. For a year *at least* he'd been an old man. I doubt if he could have functioned.'

'Maybe *Samantha* was Lucy's lover.'

'Very contemporary thinking,' Peter allowed. 'So why try and stab her with a sharpened crucifix?'

Mary peered in through the open door and grinned. 'A

vampire lover? Samantha the Vampire spurns Lucy after months of hot lesbian passion. Assuming lesbians *have* hot passions.'

'Maybe they went picketing missile stations together, and then Samantha became a Tory.'

'Good thinking,' Mary said, and went back into her room. Peter smiled, but in fact he could come up with no rational explanation for the violent attack upon Samantha by a woman who was almost twice her age, and whom Andrew had certainly not referred to during his visit a few months before.

It all reinforced his feeling that he would like to go back to Sele House and visit Samantha again. And ask her several questions. And try and fill in some strange gaps in his understanding.

Andrew's illness nagged at him. It was wrong. It had not seemed natural. And the set-up at Sele House was odd too, with a never-seen brother-in-law sharing residence, and Samantha clearly game for sexual kicks with anyone local at all.

Samantha *had* to have been having a sexual relationship with Lucy Trevithick's husband. It was the only thing, as Peter thought about it now, that made any sense. Mr Trevithick – assuming there *was* a Mr Trevithick – had been another visitor to the wild garden, where Samantha deSolla waited in naked splendour.

Perhaps it was a residual confusion, and curiosity, that had caused Peter so flagrantly to ignore his old friend's last, fervent wish.

Don't come to the funeral. And don't tell Mary to come. Stay away.

And yet, when he had received the telegram from Samantha, he had not even thought about Andrew's request, nor had the bizarre ritual of the carved symbol on his shoulder worried him. His shoulder was healed and he never thought of the mark, now. He had heard of Andrew's death and come straight to Penthor. And he had telephoned Mary as well.

Asking for trouble.

As always.

He finished with his camera and sat on the bed, watching the half-opened door. Mary had gone quite quiet. She had also

closed the door almost completely between them, but not totally so.

Peter stood up carefully, and walked quietly to his own wardrobe. He rested his hand on the handle, but didn't open it. Instead, he peered carefully through the six-inch gap in the door, into Mary's room.

Guiltily he shifted position, as quietly as possible. He could hear her moving about. She was murmuring to herself, an odd habit of hers. In fact, she was singing a song without singing. Hating her voice, she usually just spoke the words of songs to herself, in rhythm.

She passed across Peter's field of view, fiddling with the belt of her dress. Drawing the dress up over her head, she flung the sweaty garment onto the bedside table. Peter drew back slightly, then looked again, his heart beating quite fast.

There was no question about it, Mary Conway was a sexually very attractive woman, as well as being one of the brightest and nicest mortal souls that he knew. For years they had teased and tickled each other, from a childish fondling of each other's bodies to a more adult, but still adolescent, petting that never went 'all the way'. They were second cousins, but had been brought up together by Peter's own parents, Mary's having been killed in a plane crash when she was six.

Watching her, Peter felt again all the confusion, of guilt and desire, that surely was common in such circumstances. The contemplation of a relationship with Mary was not the contemplation of incest; but the brother/sister barrier had always existed between them, to their mutual embarrassment, and indeed their mutual frustration.

It was right, and yet it was not right. And during all of the years that they had grown up together they had been intimate in ways that should have been normal, but which had been made evil by the sinister words of discouragement of his parents.

Mary was beautiful. As she slipped out of her remaining clothes she seemed almost to be deliberately displaying herself for Peter's hungry eyes. She examined her breasts, rubbed a tissue over her belly, turned and stooped to unbuckle her high-heeled shoes, and stretched luxuriously, as she called out, 'I'm going to shower. Shan't be long.'

Peter took four quick steps back into his room and called, 'Fine. I'll go after you.'

Later, they walked down to the sea, and kicked about along the shore line. Mary collected the dainty, red cone-shells that were strewn there, and Peter scuffed among the weeds for diamond rings.

'I could never have been a beachcomber. I'm far too avaricious.'

'I could've,' Mary said. 'Live in a little hut made out of driftwood, and have the whole beach to myself at dawn and dusk. Idyllic.'

'You'd starve. You only collect shells, ever.'

She snorted. 'Caligula filled his treasury in *Rome* with shells from England's shores.'

'Caligula was a loony. He ate his wife's baby.'

'Better than that fast-food junk that you eat.'

He skipped a flat stone out across the still ocean, counting the bounces aloud, and applauding himself as he scored eight. Hands in his pockets, then, he followed Mary, who, dressed in jeans and a loose cardigan, was still scavenging molluscs. 'How's work, Mary?'

'Don't ask. How's yours?'

'Pretty good.'

'Who have you photographed lately? Any royalty?'

'Mayor of Hackney. In full regalia. Plus wife. Nice job. Nice pay. Nice results.'

'I'm impressed,' Mary said, unimpressed. She straightened up, holding out her hands, which were piled high with shells. 'That's enough, I think.' She turned to Peter and smiled. 'Make you a necklace, sir? Only fifty quid.'

'You'll be lucky.'

'Throw in me body for another ten, sir. Can't be fairer than that.'

'You've got a deal,' Peter said, and grabbed for her.

Mary laughed and backed away. 'Always so damned horny. How *is* the sex life?'

Peter sighed and stopped his pursuit of the woman. He looked sorrowfully out to sea. 'It happens occasionally. I've got the dates written down, if you're interested.'

'That rare, eh?'

'Put it this way. If I'd got six shots in my gun, I wouldn't have needed to reload for two years.'

'That *is* bad.'

He looked at her. Her hair was straight, framing a face which shone with fun, the eyes twinkling. She was watching him peculiarly, head cocked to one side. 'Has anyone ever told you that you're a very handsome man?'

He snapped his fingers. 'If only I'd realised, I'd have done so much better . . .'

'Don't mock me, Peter. You *are*. Accept the compliment with grace!

'I accept the compliment,' he said drily. 'I'll have Grace, now. Where is she?'

'You're impossible,' she said.

'And you're lovely, cousin dearest. A lovely woman.' He looked at her. 'You have a quality about you that can instantly bring turgor to the loins.'

'Disgusting beast. That's the trouble with men and sex. When they're not getting it, it's all they talk about.'

'I shan't ask you about *your* sex life, then,' Peter said, but added, 'On the other hand, maybe I will. How's the man situation?'

Mary shrugged, cradling her shells carefully. 'Put it this way, if I'd been shot six times in the last year I'd be happy enough.'

'That bad, huh?' He stared out to sea.

Mary studied her shells. She said, 'Shellfish are lucky beggars. If there's no one else around, they just make love to themselves . . .'

In this way, idling and idly chatting, they passed an hour. Neither of them wanted to end the moment. It had been a long time since they had last talked, and many years since they had indulged their teasing, rather adolescent senses of humour. All that was missing, of course, was Andrew. They felt his absence acutely. It made them occasionally sad, as they strolled about the beach and at last came back towards the outer harbour, above which their hotel was a pronounced, dark monolith. But the sadness was short-lived. They were too pleased, too happy to be together again.

'I wouldn't like to think that it took Andrew's death to get us close again,' Peter said. 'But in a way, it has . . .'

'Let's not think about that,' Mary murmured softly. 'Let's just stay here for a day or two, and think about him, and have fun, and relax, and give him our own sort of burial. Let's bury him in style.'

They watched a fisherman on the outer harbour wall, for a moment. He was slowly reeling in a length of line that seemed to stretch almost to the setting sun itself. He didn't acknowledge the young couple from his position on the concrete wall, and Peter led the way past him, intending to begin the steep climb to the hotel.

He stopped suddenly, staring into the distance, towards the dark building. Mary stopped too, watching the man who walked there, noticing how he stopped at the high path, and looked down towards them.

'Who is he?' Mary breathed softly.

Peter stared at the young man, at his white clothes, his almost arrogant stance. His fair hair was ruffled in the onshore breeze. He had his hands in his pockets. He seemed to be smiling, and although from this distance it was impossible to perceive more than a lean-faced attractiveness about the man, Peter was convinced that he could see the oddly dark eyes, and the firm set of the jaw . . . the features that he shared with his sister, Samantha.

'It's Daniel,' he said. 'I'm sure of it. I've seen him before.'

'He's beautiful . . .' Mary said, and a moment later seemed shocked with herself, glancing at her cousin in something approaching embarrassment. She smiled, then laughed. 'Must be worse than I thought,' she added.

When they looked back at the high path, Daniel – if indeed it was he – had disappeared.

But Peter knew where he was going. He was walking up to the Bay View Hotel. Peter felt his heartbeat quicken, as he imagined Gabrielle Danton anticipating Daniel's arrival, and preparing herself for the same sadistic sexual encounter that Peter felt he had partially witnessed once before.

He had to force himself to walk only slowly back to the hotel.

In fact, Gabrielle Danton was just going out as the Conways arrived in the foyer. She greeted them both, and exchanged a pleasantry or two about their walk, the weather, and even the funeral. There was no sign of Daniel.

Slightly puzzled, but intrigued by his own fascination with the young man, Peter led the way upstairs, and unlocked the door of his room while Mary went to the bathroom.

On the floor, pushed under the door, was a small white envelope; it explained Daniel's presence in the hotel. He had not come for sex at all, but to deliver his sister's compliments and an invitation:

' . . . I would like to spend the rest of today alone, as I'm sure you will both understand. But Andrew would not have wanted you to leave without coming to Sele House, and being entertained in royal fashion. Alas, I can only offer you lunch. Tomorrow. Do come. At about midday. Again, I apologise for my hasty departure from the church this morning. I was both unwell, and upset. My grateful thanks for your attendance. Although I didn't speak to you, your presence was a great comfort. Until noon tomorrow . . .

'With affectionate best wishes, Samantha deSolla.'

Chapter Six

They rose early, changed quickly into their swimming costumes, and ran down to the sea, close to the bay, where there was a stretch of fine sand. The water was surprisingly warm, and they splashed and swam delightedly for a few minutes before returning to the hotel for breakfast.

They were both apprehensive of going up to Sele House for lunch with Samantha deSolla. It was an irrational feeling, shared and acknowledged by both, but they could not be rude to the woman. Peter was keen to see the house again, and to see the beautiful woman whom he felt he knew so intimately . . . and Mary was quite keen to see Daniel. She teased Peter about it, dreamily reminiscing about the glimpse of the young man she had had the evening before.

Peter refused to rise to the bait.

They shopped in the small town, mostly for a good bottle of white wine to present with their compliments. The streets were still quiet, and there seemed to be an unnatural hush hanging over every shop, every house. Peter was acutely aware of being watched in a manner that he could only describe as 'suspicious'. Even their dealings with shop keepers bordered on received hostility.

Mary saw Lucy at one point, and the woman stopped in the street, staring; she made to suddenly cross the road towards the stranger, but a man with her restrained her.

The local doctor, Peter told her, as he came out of the newsagent's with a daily paper.

Mary felt unhappy and unnerved by the unwelcoming atmosphere everywhere, and they walked quickly back to the harbour area.

At half past eleven they began the steady uphill walk along

the west cliff, towards the dense undergrowth and semi-wild woodland that shrouded the deSolla house. Mary could hardly believe what she was seeing, the view, the tranquillity, and the mysterious old building almost seeming to *grow* out of the undergrowth.

'It's like something out of a fevered Gothic dream,' she whispered. 'It's wonderful. I'd *love* to live here.'

They stood by the brick gate-posts. Two walkers, heavy rumpers tied around their waists, strolled past along the small road, moving towards the cliff path. Peter could just see the sea in the distance, but he could smell it strongly on the breeze.

He opened the gate and led Mary along the gravel pathway towards the house itself. There was movement in the bush, surreptitious and gentle, but though Peter's heart raced as he peered into the gloom, he saw only tiny bird-like forms, and not the shape of Samantha deSolla in full nude splendour.

She was waiting for them in the library room, standing by the window, her tall, serene body bathed in bright light. When they had hammered on the door she had called them to come in, and they had picked their way cautiously through the downstairs rooms until they had found her.

'I love sunlight,' Samantha said. 'I could stand in it all day.'

It was a complete *non sequitur,* and Peter just smiled, then coughed awkwardly. From the sound of Mary's breathing he imagined she was wildly restraining a growing temptation to giggle.

He himself did not feel like laughing. The sunlight, streaming in through the small window, seemed almost to flow through Samantha's body. Her dress was simple, white and short, and was translucent so that her slim shape showed darkly against the fabric. Her face, half in shadow, half in light, seemed more refined, more gently angular than he remembered, but her lips were no less sensuous, and her wide, slightly slanted eyes were vivid and compelling.

She watched Peter with an expression that might aptly have been termed 'hunger'.

At last she stepped forward. Her hand shake was cool. She smiled gently at Mary, but her main attention was reserved for Peter himself. She licked her lips quickly, then smiled self-

consciously. She kept hold of his hand, then closed her other hand over the grip, turning to Mary. 'Your cousin is a very beautiful young man. I hadn't remembered.' She looked back at Peter. Her eyes were almost purple. 'I'm so sorry that I didn't speak more to you the last time you were here . . .'

'Never mind,' Peter said, and deftly detached his hand from the woman's grasp. He noticed that he was trembling slightly. He could also see that Mary was disturbed, indeed put-out, by Samantha's over-attentiveness to her cousin. 'I'm just sorry that I come back under such trying circumstances.'

'It's very sad,' Samantha said. 'But Andrew was very ill.'

'We shall miss him very much,' Mary said, and there was an edge in her voice. 'He was a very good friend of ours.'

Samantha turned to her, then startled Mary by reaching out, taking hold of her hands and kissing her quickly on the cheek. 'I know. He told me. I shan't miss him any less than you, but I know how empty you must feel. Thank you for coming yesterday. It was a long way to travel.'

'Distance was no object,' Mary whispered nervously. She glanced at Peter, who said, 'We were sorry about the disturbance. That woman . . .'

Samantha deSolla turned, releasing Mary's hands. She was nearly as tall as Peter, and took his arm gently as she led them both from the library into the hallway, and then out into the garden. 'I had forgotten all about it.'

'She was going to stab you. With a crucifix. She seemed very angry.'

'Perhaps she was,' Samantha said, infuriatingly not taking the bait and explaining more about what she knew. They walked around the lawn, and Samantha pointed out some of the plants that were growing there. But Peter was not to be shaken off the scent so quickly.

'I must ask, Samantha . . . Andrew would expect it of me. Are you in danger here?'

'In danger?'

'Yesterday a woman tried to stab you. I appreciate that you don't wish to talk about it, but I *am* concerned about your well-being. If there is some danger to you here, then I would like –

we *both* would like . . .' he corrected himself, glancing at Mary, 'to help you in any way we can.'

'That's very kind of you, Peter,' Samantha said, reaching down to pluck the leaf of a small, grey-green plant. She straightened up, rubbing the leaf between her fingers. 'I'm not in danger,' she said. 'Not physical danger. I'm in danger of being lonely . . .' She glanced round at him and smiled, and Peter felt a tug in his chest, a shockwave of feeling passing through his whole body. 'This is toadwort,' she said, holding the leaf towards him. 'One of Andrew's research plants. It's very rare in this country.'

Peter took the leaf and smelled it. The ugly leaf, when crushed, smelled strongly of mimosa.

Samantha went on, 'This whole garden was planted by Andrew. He called it the "weird-patch". Practically everything here is reputed to have a consciousness effect. In the old days it would have been called "magic remedy". There's everything here to make a witch's brew, or a love philtre, any of the old spells.' She looked at Mary and smiled. 'None of it works, of course.'

Peter asked, 'Is that what Andrew was doing here? Researching occult practice?'

'Not really. He was a parapsychologist. I thought you knew that.'

'I did,' Peter said quickly, slightly irritated. 'That's why I asked. I don't understand the relevance of these plants . . .'

As she led them away from the weird-patch, Samantha said, 'He was interested in the extent to which such plants and herbs could expand consciousness. Psychic power comes out of an altered state, and he found that several plants used by occultists in the Middle Ages had psychotropins, or neurotropins, or some sort of neuro-something. Expanded and altered consciousness states could be induced by infusions of the extract, and ESP tests gave astonishingly increased success rates. It was fascinating work. But he never published any of it . . .'

Without having asked for it, and without Samantha proposing it, she was leading her visitors on a conducted tour of the grounds of Sele House. As they walked she asked questions: about their work, about where they lived, about

themselves, more personal questions which bordered on unwelcome curiosity . . . and about their childhood with Andrew. They talked and relaxed more with each passing minute. They fought their way through tangles of rich, green growth in stands of bamboo. They climbed over low brick walls, almost completely covered with creeper. They found hidden gates, and secret gardens within the main garden – in which there was an astonishingly deep well – and, of course, the semi-wildwood that completely dominated the grounds to the east and south.

As they walked through this dense undergrowth, Peter suddenly recognised where he was. Samantha led them straight to the glade where, six months ago, she had been in such a passionate embrace with the man Flynn. Peter felt the blood rise to his cheeks, and was acutely embarrassed when Samantha led the way into the cleared space, and turned to stare at him.

There was just the hint of a smile on her lips, but her gaze was intense and deliberate.

'This is lovely,' Mary said innocently, turning round and looking up through the gap in the branches overhead. 'A little fairy glade in your woodland. How lovely. I'd spend hours here.'

'I do spend hours here,' Samantha said, and her lips stretched wider in a smile, and the knowingness in her eyes, as she stared straight and hard at Peter, increased tenfold. She went on, 'I was born here, in one way.'

'Born here?' Mary said. 'Really?'

'Not in any real way,' Samantha said, looking at her. She waved her arms around the clearing. 'This is a special place. It's where I first really came to consciousness. With Andrew's help, with my dear Andrew's help. This is where I came. The first place I remember. I stayed here for days. I was very frightened. Andrew stayed with me. We made this place into our special house. Our camp. We lit a fire, and we burned herbs, and we sang songs, and he fetched food from the house, and stayed with me. He was helping me, you see. Helping me through. Until I came here . . .' She hesitated, and shook her head. Then she simply repeated, 'This was the first place. I always come here when I'm sad.'

The quick look which passed between Peter and Mary confirmed for each of them that they were equally mystified by what Samantha deSolla was saying. It made no sense to Peter at all.

From what she had said it sounded as if Andrew had somehow brought her to a form of 'life'. Had she been in a coma? Had she been lost in a trance state, or without full consciousness, until Andrew deSolla had used his parapsychological technique to break through to the grey matter that had been so blocked?

It was an endearing and romantic notion, but he hesitated to ask more, and the moment passed. He was left with an image of the beautiful woman two years ago, silent, blind and without awareness, being brought to this silent place in the wood, and slowly nurtured to consciousness by a man using all the skills of his trade . . .

Magic; magic by any other name!

They went back to the house, and into the wide, empty kitchen, where Samantha had prepared a light lunch. They sat around the heavy wood table, but Samantha had become remote now, quite distracted. For most of the meal they ate in silence.

Peter's appetite had gone almost completely. He toyed with the sliced turkey, and watched the woman, and was aware that Mary did not approve of his intense interest in the widow deSolla.

When Samantha had finished eating she suddenly looked up at Peter and said, 'Earlier you asked me whether or not I was in danger here.'

'That's right. If you are, then we'll help.'

'Thank you. I'm sure I'm not. Not physical danger. But loneliness is a very desperate thing. I needed to be alone last night, but I would love company for the next few days. I wondered . . .' She turned to look at Mary, and Mary stiffened beneath the sudden gaze.

'I wondered,' Samantha continued, 'whether you would consider staying here tonight. Perhaps for a night or two. I could make you very comfortable.'

'I'm not sure . . .' Mary said meekly, casting a frantic glace at Peter. 'I have to get back to work fairly soon.'

Peter said, 'We *had* decided to stay a few days . . .' He broke off as Mary looked at him desperately, as if to ask, What on earth are you doing? We *can't* stay here.

'Then why not bring your bags to the house? I'll make up two rooms for you.'

Samantha looked quickly back at Mary, who flashed an easy smile at her, only to look furiously back at Peter when the woman's head turned away again.

'I'm not sure,' Peter said. 'We've paid for our time at the Bay View Hotel, and it would seem like an intrusion on your grief to be here . . .'

Samantha said gently, 'I'd love you to be here. Both of you. It would mean so much to me, and might help the grief to pass more quickly. I beg you to think about it. Be my guests for a night, two nights. I shan't expect to be with you. Have fun, do what you like, and gather here in the evening for supper. I'll have something very special cooked for you.'

Peter stared at her, then at Mary, who finally shrugged and gave up, defeated.

'Very well. That would be lovely. We'll fetch our cases now, and then go for a walk. And see you this evening. About eight?'

'That would be perfect,' Samantha said. She rose from the table and glanced out the kitchen window at the bright sky. 'I have something to do, now, so I'll leave you. Treat the house as your own. I'll see you this evening.'

Chapter Seven

Though they brooded about it, and argued about it, for most of the afternoon, Samantha's request proved impossible to refuse. At six in the evening Peter sent for a taxi, and together, with their cases, they went back to the old house on the west cliff.

An elaborate, and quite exquisite supper had been laid out for them in the dining room. There was a note from Samantha which simply read, 'I am not feeling at all well. Do forgive me. I have a migraine, or some similar irritation, and I feel very sad, and very alone. But I'm so glad you came to stay with me. Your presence is a great comfort. I will see you at breakfast. S.'

Mary, she openly admitted, felt a great relief that Samantha was not there. 'I'm sorry she's got a headache,' she said to Peter, as she prowled about the table, inspecting the food, 'But that's one headache I totally approve of.'

'You're very cruel,' Peter said, folding Samantha's letter and pocketing it.

Mary looked at him. 'You're disappointed . . .'

'Certainly I am.' He reached over and plucked the wine from its half-melted ice wrap. It was a 1968 Montrachet, a very fine wine.

'You fancy her,' Mary said, plucking a large slice of very rare beef from the cold plate. She folded it in her fingers and lowered it into her mouth, closing her eyes and quietly moaning her ecstasy. Mouth still full, she said, 'I'll say one thing. She can bloody cook, that woman. This beef is *running* . . . Oh God, it's divine.'

She sat down, plucked a paper napkin from the wine glass that had been set at one of the two places, and began to load her plate. 'Artichokes, fresh salmon mousse, crayfish tails in mayonnaise, *new* potatoes – in September! – rare beef, broccoli

in nutmeg butter . . . Oh God! I want to stay for a year.' She stared up at Peter as she chewed on a crayfish tail, dabbing at her mouth with her napkin. 'Pour me some wine, waiter . . .'

Peter sat down slowly, poured wine, then distractedly helped himself to a small plate of beef.

Mary scorned him. 'Fancy her all you like. I think you're a fool. But marry her and I'll be a regular dinner guest . . .'

'I don't fancy her,' Peter said.

'She fancies you, though. I could see it. *Your cousin is a very beautiful young man.*' She mimicked Samantha deSolla's voice as she repeated the words from earlier that day. 'Ain't he just,' she said bitterly. 'So if you want to *fuck* her, you go ahead. She'll be ready, willing and I'm sure very *able!*'

Suddenly angry, Peter banged the table with his hand, so hard that plates and cutlery jumped inches into the air. 'Mary. SHUT. UP. I do *not* fancy her. She does *not* fancy me. Just eat, drink, and for Christ's sake keep your paranoid delusions to yourself. I'm sick and bloody *tired* of your negative attitude to this woman. Just shut up, eat and go to bed!'

Mary stared at him, chewing slowly. She had only been teasing. Only joking. She was shocked by his outburst. It was so unexpected, so irrational. She looked down at her plate, and at her glass, then at Peter again. Slowly she rose to her feet. Peter said, 'I'm sorry.'

'Fuck off.'

'I'm *sorry*, dammit.'

'You always knew how to piss me off, Peter. You've done it again.'

Coldly, coolly, she heaped more beef, more salmon and more crayfish onto her plate. She plucked the whole bottle of Montrachet from the ice bucket, and walked stiffly from the room.

Mary came awake abruptly, filled with an alarming sense of being watched. Her bedroom was dark, its further recesses shrouded in deep shadow. She glanced at her alarm clock. Its glowing red digits told her that it was 5 a.m. The sense that someone was in the room was very strong and she felt a rising surge of apprehension.

The room was strange to her. She had not got used to its contours and awkward angles. The curtains were not quite fully drawn. The wardrobe loomed large to her right. The ceiling sloped awkwardly. The whole room shifted and creaked.

Was it Peter? She felt a surge of guilt, of irritation with herself. She should have gone to *his* room to apologise. He was quite right in his silent condemnation of her. She was jealous of Samantha. Jealous of Samantha's interest in Peter. Peter was strong, he would not have fallen that easily into a woman's spell, not even a woman as alluring, as sexual, as Samantha deSolla.

She had behaved badly.

Was it Peter, now, come to express his own regrets? Or . . .

Or was it Peter come to *look* at her again. Was he standing there, watching the brightness of the moonlight on her breasts and shoulders. She was sleeping naked. The covers were low over her belly. She sat up slowly, letting the thin blanket fall down even further. She trembled slightly, enjoying the sensation of being naked, of being exposed, of being watched.

Nothing moved in the room. The shadows were still. What she had thought was a man's shape was just her bathrobe, hanging behind the door.

This is ridiculous, she thought, and reached out to switch on the bedside lamp.

The weak illumination created a pool of light around the bed, but left the remainder of the room shadowy. Still, she could see clearly enough, now, that the door was slightly ajar, and that a man was standing just inside, looking across at her.

Her skin crawled slightly, but she didn't cover herself. 'Peter . . .?' she began, but trailed away as her eyes adjusted and she saw that it was not her cousin.

The man who stood there was dressed all in white. His shirt was open to the belly, his trousers loose. He had his hands in his pockets, and one ankle was crossed over the other as he leaned against the wall of the bedroom. He had thick, fair hair, and piercing eyes that looked black in the dimness. His features were doubly familiar: he bore a strong resemblence to Samantha deSolla, in the lean angularity of his features, in the eyes, and in the sheer beauty of his face. He was also instantly

recognisable as the man she had seen, with Peter, the evening before.

'Hello, Daniel,' she said calmly. She tried to sound light and casual, but she was thinking, *What's he doing here?*

The man said nothing, but stood leaning against the lintel, looking at her with a frank directness which made her want to drop her own gaze, break the eye contact. But she could not. His eyes held her. There was something in his look which seemed to pull her towards him with almost physical force. Mary realised that her breath was now no more than a series of rapid, shallow gasps. There was a magnetism about him so strong that she found her arm, without conscious volition, moving to pull the sheet away from her naked body, exposing herself totally to his scrutiny.

Frightened by the intensity of the look, Mary forced herself to avert her eyes, staring down at her hands. She half-reluctantly reached down to cover her pubis, trying to retain a moment's dignity, even though her legs were apart, one draped over the bed in an overt and promiscuous invitation. Her mouth was dry. *God,* she thought, *if this is the effect Samantha has, no wonder Peter was so entranced by her.* She had never known such a direct, powerful jolt of sexual energy.

Then she heard the door click shut. She looked up again. She was alone in the room. She heard light footsteps receding along the corridor and down the stairs. After a moment she heard the front door close.

Mary jumped out of bed, went to the window and pulled back a corner of the curtain. It was still dark outside, with just the first glimmer of dawn showing in the sky. Daniel was walking away down the path, his movement graceful and unhurried.

Where was he going at this time, this elusive brother of Samantha's? Mary found herself quickly slipping on T-shirt and jeans. *What am I doing?* She sat on the edge of the bed and tugged on a pair of trainers. *I'm going to follow him . . .*

As she slipped from the house she knew that what she was doing was very odd. And yet, she was almost *compelled* to follow the man. Part of her was frightened by the way she no longer seemed to be controlling her action; a stronger part of her was anxious not to lose sight of Daniel's white-clad figure.

It was chilly outside, and she immediately regretted not having dressed more warmly. Still, she did not want to turn back, and she hurried down the path, moving as quietly as she could. The gravel crunched noisily underfoot and she was sure she could be heard for miles around. Under the trees it was still quite dark.

A long way ahead she saw the grey rectangle of the gate, and caught sight of Daniel's figure going through it and turning towards the town.

When Mary emerged onto the road, Daniel was nowhere to be seen. She walked up in the direction in which he had gone, passing a thick, tangled hedgerow which marked the border of Sele House. Beyond that was a sign which marked the edge of the town proper, and further still were half a dozen large detached houses, each in its own extensive grounds.

She saw and followed Daniel for a few minutes. He walked along a narrow roadway, away from the cliffs and between these large, remote buildings, and cut inland in a circular route that brought him back towards Penthor. The ground dropped sharply away through farmland. Mary climbed a gate, and saw, distantly, the tower of the church.

At the edge of the town were low, white-walled bungalows. It was getting quite bright, but remained eerily still, as Mary came among them, searching for a sign of Daniel, who had now disappeared from sight.

Mary stood irresolutely, rubbing her chilled arms, feeling slightly foolish. What was she *doing* here? It was uncharacteristic and stupid. Whatever Daniel's business was, she had no business minding it for him. It was almost as if some residuum of the magnetism she had felt had forced her to manufacture a pretext to follow him. Now it had worn off and the situation seemed absurd.

What would she say if he reappeared suddenly, returning after his early walk?

She turned back towards the house, walking quickly past the outlying bungalows.

And suddenly she heard a cry from one of the houses on her right, a larger building that stood well away from the others. The cry had been a low noise, hardly audible, but urgent and

painful. Mary walked quickly towards it, then hesitated, then walked again, passing around its back, and slipping through the small, iron gate.

The noise came again, a human cry, not loud enough to cause a disturbance, but carrying easily to her ears on the still dawn air.

She stepped gingerly across the wide back lawn and stood staring at the closed curtains of one of the bedroom windows.

There was another cry, and another, and another . . . a series of sobbing wails, which spoke of appalling agony mixed, somehow, with unbearable ecstasy. It was a woman's cry, there was no doubt about that, but what could it mean? Mary knew that some women were supposed to make noises during love making, but nothing, surely, like this? Nor was it simple *pain*, as in an assault.

The shrieks grew louder and more frequent, building to an unendurable climax. Suddenly flooded with panic, Mary covered her ears and ran, away from the bungalow and towards the woodland on the rise of land, towards the sea.

At some point she must have taken a wrong turning. She eventually emerged onto a part of the cliff that seemed to face in the wrong direction. The ocean was a shimmering lake of orange fire, reflecting the newly risen sun. She was too far to the east.

Sweating and shaking, she began to follow the cliff path back to more familiar territory.

Lucy Trevithick had lain alone in her bed, watching as the grey dawn light began to seep through the thin curtains. She had hardly slept. She never slept well when her husband wasn't with her, and she slept terribly when she was uncertain as to his safety, even his whereabouts.

It had always been like this.

Every time she had fallen into a light doze, during the night, her fear and anxiety had quickly jerked her back to wakefulness.

He would come before sunrise. She was certain of that. When her husband was away, he always came, and always before sunrise . . .

In the minutes before that dread time her mind went over the events of two days ago again, like a toy train stuck forever on the same circle of track. Who were those people at deSolla's

funeral? Did they share his evil? Or were they innocent outsiders, about to be trapped in something beyond their youthful, sane comprehension?

Looking back, there was no aura of evil about them, and by now – after all that had happened – Lucy was sensitised to such things. In which case . . . she *should* have warned them, *should* have made clear – the danger they were in. If they were trapped, she would have to carry the blame. Maybe she should go up to the house now, make them leave, do *something* . . .but they wouldn't believe her. Even her friends in Penthor, people she had known all of her life, wouldn't believe her.

They'd think she'd had a breakdown. And perhaps they would be right. Whatever had made her attack Samantha yesterday, it had been some lesser, some more primitive part of Lucy Trevithick. She could no longer control all of her actions, or her thoughts. Knowing this, being aware of it in sane moments, made her sick, and made her sick of living.

The time to end all of this would have to come soon. Only fear, only a failure of her deeper courage, had prevented her yet from breaking the awful cycle. But death beckoned like a welcome friend. It was in every shadow, every murmur of the woodlands, every shimmering wink of the great ocean.

Soon . . .

If she could just find the courage . . .

She must have dropped into a light, confused sleep, because when she next opened her eyes he was standing at the bed. As he undressed he looked down at her, his impossibly handsome face blank and contemptuous. His eyes seemed to penetrate her own, generating a power that drilled into her mind and dissolved her defences. Lucy began to tremble, as usual, with a mixture of fear and uncontrollable desire. She felt her body preparing itself to welcome him, even as a tiny corner of her trapped self screamed soundlessly in terror and loathing.

Daniel arranged his clothes fastidiously on a chair, then came to the side of the bed and pulled back the sheet. As usual he said nothing, just looked down at her naked body in a way which made it clear that he viewed its middle-aged thickening and sagging with distaste. The contrast with his smooth, pale

perfection was obvious. Then he climbed onto the bed and began to caress her legs and belly . . .

And it began again.

Whenever Daniel was inside her, Lucy went into a kind of delirium, her mind withdrawing in self-protection from the reality of what was happening. It was almost as if she was dreaming a series of disconnected, vivid images and sensations. There were his hard, swift thrusts, each one almost lifting her off the bed, and bringing with them a jolt of pain, but also an ecstasy so intense that she reached out involuntarily to clasp his buttocks and pull him still deeper into her . . . there were his fingernails, long and sharp, raking her flanks and shoulders with lines of fire, and the bright beads of blood springing up like scarlet flowers in their wake . . . there was the smooth sliding of his body against hers . . . and, worst of all, there was the look which came over him, the animal expression of hatred and cruelty, the lips drawing back in a snarl, the growling noise deep in his throat, and the eyes, the eyes that seemed to grow huge, like pools of violet quicksand that were sucking her soul into their depths . . .

She seemed to be suspended in an endless moment of agony and pleasure, which went on and on and on until he came, filling her belly with fire and ice, making her cry out again and again with the terrible pain, mixed with an almost unbearable orgasm which sent cramps and fingers of pain rippling through her entire body.

After he had finished, Daniel rose from the bed and went to stand by the window, staring out into the day. Lucy lay spread-eagled and exhausted, watching him through half-lidded eyes, watching the idle, almost distracted way that he stroked himself, keeping power in the glistening branch that he had used to hurt her so badly.

'It's done,' he said after a while.

'What's done?' Lucy asked, her voice shaking, her body too tired to raise itself from the mattress.

He turned to her. He looked cool and composed, almost charming. His appearance reminded her of their first meeting. But when he smiled there was no mirth there, and when he spoke there was no warmth.

'I've done what I came here to do. I felt it in you . . .'

'Felt what . . .?' Lucy began, but as she said it, so she felt it for herself, in her lower abdomen. A movement, a stirring: a life, forming within her. When she looked down at herself she could *see* it: a tremor like the first warnings of an earthquake. Her breath caught in her throat. She could feel her heart pounding violently, and there was a salty taste, like blood, in her mouth. 'But's that's impossible. I'm too old . . .'

Daniel laughed, a sound like knives being sharpened. 'You see it. You feel it. It's possible. It's done.' He came over to stand by her, his body close to her head. 'It's finished . . .' he whispered.

'It can't be finished,' she murmured back, and panic rose as she felt him slipping away from her. Too trapped by him to recognise the release he offered her, she began to cry, and would have screamed out her fear if she had had the strength.

He lifted her head in two powerful hands, and pulled her mouth to the thick, dark skin of his phallus. 'Say goodbye to Daniel . . .' he said mockingly, then let her fall back to the bed. She looked up at him, her mouth open, wanting more, so desperately wanting more. His eyes blazed, and there was a hint of that savage, feral look.

It was no more than she had suspected, or expected, or even known, but to hear him say it drained all feeling from her, leaving only a vast despairing hollowness.

And then she felt it move again, kicking inside her, except that it wasn't like the kicking she remembered from her own children . . . It felt more like a *clawing*.

'What is it?' she whispered. 'What have you done?'

He leaned close to her, grinning malevolently. His purple eyes shone. 'It will *eat* you,' he whispered back to her. 'There will be such pain. But Lucy, what *triumph*. What incredible *fulfilment . . .*'

'What are you?' she asked weakly. 'What in God's name *are* you?'

He straightened up, still staring down at her, still smiling.

As Lucy watched, in growing horror, so the smile began to change . . .

'Watch me,' he said. 'Watch me closely. Because I shall make it impossible for you to tell anyone what you see . . . Watch me, Lucy.'

She watched him. And in the silent dawn her slow-rising wail of horror was like a siren call of warning.

Although she was in sight of Sele House now, on impulse Mary turned away from the road and found a winding track through the undergrowth that led to the scrub grass on the cliff tops themselves. The breeze was very fresh, here, and for a few minutes she stood precariously close to the drop-away, eyes closed, just feeling the wind tug at her clothes and her hair.

On the distant horizon, when she finally opened her eyes and squatted down on the damp turf, she could see an oil tanker, slowly wending its way towards the Atlantic. Two fishing skips bobbed on the water nearer to the harbour, and very faintly, very distantly, she could hear the drone of an outboard motor.

Gulls wheeled overhead. On the sea they were like tiny white flecks, almost indistinguishable from the foam caps on the gentle waves.

It was going to be a glorious day. She would have to shake off the memory of what she had just heard, and the guilt she felt at having eavesdropped on someone's innocent pleasure . . .

And that *is* what it had been. What else? And if it was Daniel, keeping a dawn liaison, then that was Daniel's business.

She breathed deeply, smiled, and began to hum a tune to herself. She plucked long strands of grass and tried to make them squawk like a bird, by blowing on them as she pressed them between her hands.

Below her was a series of terraces, with criss-cross paths making it possible, here, to climb easily up and down the cliff. On the shore, a hundred feet below, was a small bay which might she thought, have a little sandy beach when the tide was out.

She sat on the cliff top for a while, reflecting idly on what had happened the day before, on the argument with Peter, and on what she might do today in order to make full use of this break in her work routine.

She had just decided that a freezing cold dawn swim was called for, when below her she saw movement. A figure, moving up the path, coming in and out of sight behind huge outcrops of fallen granite.

At first she thought it was Daniel again, since the figure was dressed all in white too . . . but as it grew closer she saw the abundant tumble of hair and realised it was Samantha, out for an early morning stroll of her own, now making her way back to the house.

Embarrassment overtook Mary again. She did not want to have to explain what she was doing out at such an early hour, even though it was quite natural to want to see the dawn come up.

Ducking out of possible sight, she hurried back to Sele House before she could be seen.

When Daniel had gone, Lucy rose from the bed and put on her dressing gown. She walked through into the sitting room and sat down at the bureau. She moved slowly, with measured steps, her face empty of expression. Taking out a pen and notepad she began to write a letter. Part of her mind watched all this going on with remote detachment, as if it was an old film being re-run on television. She knew the ending, and it no longer had any power to move her.

She signed the letter, blotted it carefully, and left it on the open bureau flap, weighted down by the pen. She walked into the kitchen, went to the utensil drawer, and selected what she needed. She went out of the kitchen door, closing it carefully behind her.

Dawn light was spreading rapidly across the sky, a pink stain which began in the east and gradually dissolved away the darkness. Tatters of sea mist lay in the trees away from the cliffs, but a light breeze was rapidly dispersing the fog. The grass was wet under her bare feet as she walked and ran across the fields, heading for the steepest part of the west cliffs, where the water came right up to the cliff bases themselves.

As she ran, she glanced into the distance, and saw the roof of Sele House. She moved past it, wondering whether or not Daniel was back there, by now, and if he was watching her.

In a few minutes she was scampering through the tangled scrub wood that bordered the cliffs themselves. Hawthorn snagged at her, tearing her gown and drawing blood. The red

stain quickly blended in with the other marks where blood from her scratches had soaked the material.

A light wind was blowing from the sea. As she stood, staring down, everything had a sharp clarity in the first yellow shafts of sunlight. A hundred feet below her the waves crashed against a tumble of rock. She watched in an abstracted way the patterns of foam, each different from the last, and noted how the criss-cross patterns of surface ripples overlaid the deeper swell. Her fear of heights had always before prevented her from observing these things, but now she stood indifferently, her toes digging into the crumbly soil of the cliff edge, and looked vertically down, beyond the wheeling gulls.

She held up the knife, seeing its blade catch the sun. She ran a finger along its sharp edge, and pricked it with the point. She untied the dressing gown, letting it fall around her ankles, and stood naked in the dawn light. The wind chilled her skin, raising goosepimples on her flesh. She gripped the knife in both hands and held it with the point towards her abdomen, towards the place where she felt a stirring – almost a movement of alarm – within. Lucy felt completely calm. She had wondered in the past how Japanese warriors, forced into a similar position by disgrace, could do such things to themselves. Now she understood that once your life was over (and her life had ended, she now knew, the day she met Daniel), it was a small thing to slaughter the shell of your body.

Almost of their own accord, her hands plunged the knife home. She gave a slight involuntary gasp at the pain, and the way in which her strength seemed to flow down through her body and soak into the ground. She drew the blade across her stomach and watched with detached interest as the wound gaped and began to yield its contents.

Then she saw the part-formed thing which groped its way towards the light, and she screamed, and with her last strength launched herself into space.

The scream echoed all the way down, lost and confused among the shrieking of the white gulls.

Chapter Eight

David Pardoe adjusted his position slightly on the flat rock, and took a deep contented puff from his pipe. After a hard day's work, when the catch had been sorted and boxed and despatched, he liked nothing better than to sit here, on the tumbled rock of the west shore, and watch the sun sink over the sea. A fisherman for all of his adult life – and he was nearly sixty, now – his feelings about the sea were complex, and he could not easily have found words to express them. It provided his family's livelihood, but it was also a constant source of danger to the unwary, and had brought a share of tragedy to Penthor over the years.

Those times seemed remote now, however. This evening the water lay calm and flat beneath his gaze, a milky grey colour in the fading light. There was no hint of the latent power of wind and water.

He inhaled deeply, filling his lungs with a mixture of tobacco smoke and the tang of brine mixed with rotting seaweed. The quay was only a few yards behind his back, but he felt completely alone and at peace. He watched idly as a pair of herring gulls squabbled over some piece of food on the foreshore, their shrill cries echoing into the dusk.

In his reverie he did not see the man and the girl approaching until his attention was drawn by the sound of her voice, raised in an excited cry: 'We're nearly there! I can see the harbour!'

He looked up, turned his gaze towards the setting sun. The pair were limned against its red light, and he had to shade his eyes to see better. They appeared to be coming out of the sea, dark figures emerging from the blood-red ocean, but that, he knew, was a trick of perspective in the way the shore curved sharply to the west.

As they drew nearer, Pardoe could see them better. He thought that the girl was about eleven years old, a skinny, confident little thing. The man looked as if he was in his sixties. And he was blind. He did not carry a white stick, but he wore dark glasses. He was dressed in a black suit and tie, whose slight shabbiness became apparent as he approached. He wore ordinary brogues, ill-suited for the route they were taking among the rocks: they were now encrusted with sand and salt. He carried a battered suitcase.

The girl led the way, calling instructions, and he followed confidently, stumbling only occasionally on the difficult and uneven footing.

They reached the edge of the concrete path which led up to the quay. It was necessary to step up about six inches, and Pardoe observed with surprise that the girl gave the blind man no warning, so that he stubbed his toe with an audible sound and nearly fell full-length on the ground. The girl turned to Pardoe with a smile, then abruptly became solemn. She had a bright, mischievous face, and black hair cut in a short bob.

Pardoe looked back at her tolerantly. He wondered how long she had been escorting her blind 'guardian' – were they father and daughter? He found himself intrigued by the odd couple.

The blind man recovered his balance and straightened up. He took a few steps towards Pardoe and seemed to *look* at him.

'Is this Penthor?' he asked. His voice was deep and he sounded weary.

Pardoe stared at him in surprise for a moment. He was sure the girl had said nothing about his presence, and he himself hadn't spoken. But he knew that some blind people compensated for their disability through an incredible sensitivity to sound. He had probably betrayed himself with small movements, or an unconscious clearing of the throat.

'This is the harbour at the bottom of the town,' he said, adding, 'You've taken the hardest road in, though.'

The blind man smiled, then said, 'The easiest road is not always the right road.' He sounded odd, as if he was quoting, or reciting a proverb.

'Come on,' the girl said impatiently. 'I'm *hungry*.' She glared

at Pardoe then stamped away up the slope. But the blind man didn't follow at once. He turned through a wide three-quarter circle, as if scanning the area. He took a deep sniff of the sea air and sighed with a sort of satisfaction. Looking at him more closely, Pardoe realised that he couldn't possibly be the girl's father. Her grandfather, perhaps. He was also a startling man to look at. His dark hair was now receding from the temples and was streaked with white. He had a full, slightly hooked nose projecting from under the large dark glasses. He looked very aristocratic and very gaunt. His mouth was wide and humourless.

Pardoe asked, 'Will you be looking for a hotel, Mr—?'

'Hobson,' the man said agreeably. 'Yes. Can you recommend one?'

'The Bay View Hotel. You can see it from here,' Pardoe said, then blushed as he realised what he'd done. The man ignored the gaffe.

'Come *on*,' cried the girl again, a more petulant note in her voice.

Hobson walked towards her up the path.

'Enjoy your stay,' Pardoe said amiably, but there was no reply. He watched until the oddly-matched pair disappeared from view, then began to refill his pipe.

I have not come in vain, William Hobson thought, as he trudged up the hill towards their hotel. There was nothing definite yet, no clear sign, and yet he already sensed the presence he sought in the very atmosphere of the harbour area. He was sure that it was well-established and powerful. He had arrived not a moment to soon.

The journey had been exhausting. His legs were heavy and behind his glasses his empty eye sockets ached, as they always ached when he was tired. The case pulled at his shoulder muscles. Karianna still seemed energetic, though. He could hear her skipping around him, sucking noisily on the last of a Coca-Cola. Then there was a hollow bouncing noise as she tossed away the empty plastic cup. Another couple of steps and it crunched under his shoe. He thought briefly of admonishing the child, but it did not really matter, not now, not when it was weighed against what they would have to do.

The ground levelled out under him and he sensed the bulk of a building in front of him. He coughed, sending out a sound which returned in a pattern of echoes that enabled him to build up a sonic mental picture of the terrain, like a radar map. Small things escaped him, but William Hobson would never be found stumbling into walls or lamp posts. In most circumstances he knew his surroundings as well as sighted people. In the dark he knew them better!

'This is it,' said Karianna. 'The Bay View Hotel. It's a *dump!*'

'Hush, child. It will do for us.'

Gravel crunched underfoot as they walked up to the building. Karianna rang the doorbell: Hobson heard it tinkle somewhere deep within the hotel. After a few seconds footsteps approached from the rear of the building, a pattern of clicks which suggested high heels on a polished wood floor: a woman, then.

The door opened, and Hobson almost gagged as the odour hit him. He recoiled with a moment's panic, his breath hissing out between his teeth. The place *stank* of evil – and the evil was strongly associated with the woman. It was the smell of contamination, not of the presence itself. But it had been here. It had been here often.

And it had been here recently.

'Are you all right?' the woman asked, professional concern only partly masking her puzzled annoyance at his reaction. He knew he must have presented an odd sight, stepping sharply back from her as if she were unclean. He must not arouse suspicion until he could make some preparations.

'It's nothing,' he said lamely. 'A pain . . . nothing serious.'

When they were inside their room, Hobson locked the door and strode towards where a draught told him the window must be. He fumbled for a moment with the sashes, then pulled up the lower casement and leaned out, breathing in the cool night air.

After he had flushed and cleaned his lungs he turned back to the room.

'Feeling sick?' asked Karianna unsympathetically. He

located the girl on one of the two beds. He had put down the case on the other, and now walked to it and opened it. He transferred a few clothes to the wardrobe and chest of drawers, fumbling at first for catches and knobs, but then proceeding with assurance. He left a small leather-bound box inside the suitcase, which he then stowed under his bed.

He turned to Karianna. 'It's here, girl. Can't you smell it? Haven't you learned that much?'

'All *I* can smell is tonight's dinner,' Karianna replied drily. 'And I've suddenly lost my appetite.'

Hobson scowled at her, but was too preoccupied to bother with her petulance. He reached into his inside pocket and withdrew his wallet. Opening it, his fingers flicked past money – pound notes with the left-hand corner folded over, five pound notes with the right-hand corner folded – and withdrew two newspaper cuttings. He handed them to Karianna. 'Read them again for me, girl.'

'You already know them off by heart.'

'Read them for me!'

Karianna sighed irritably and snatched the two cuttings from Hobson's fingers. 'I *hate* this,' she said. 'I really *hate* this.'

'Hush your noise,' Hobson said. He sat down on the bed and clasped his hands in a peculiar way before him, twisting the fingers until the pulse of his blood could be felt very powerfully.

Karianna read the first cutting.

'SHIPWRECK CORPSE MYSTERY. Experts are baffled by reports of a perfectly preserved man's corpse washed ashore near the Cornish village of Penthor. The body was that of Mr Philip Palmer (29), and was one of three found trapped inside the beached wreckage of a small cabin cruiser, which had been reported missing eight months before. Two other bodies were in an advanced state of decomposition, but that of Mr Palmer showed no evidence of decay. According to local police foul play is not suspected. Asked to comment, a London pathologist said, "It would appear to be a unique case, which would repay careful study." The town's coroner, Dr Gerald Webb, examined the body himself and recorded a verdict of death by misadventure. He allowed Mr Palmer's cremation.

'The sea can have peculiar preservative qualities,' he said. 'There was nothing in this case to warrant postponing a Christian burial.' Philip Palmer was a writer and historian, author of a notable book on medieval occult philosophy.'

Karianna stared at Hobson. The man was white-faced and sweat beaded his skin.

'Read the other one,' he said quietly. Karianna sighed again.

'HARA KIRI HORROR HITS HOLIDAY HAUNT,' she intoned. 'Sleepy Cornish fishing village Penthor was rocked today by the discovery of the mutilated body of local schoolteacher Lucy Trevithick (45). Mrs Trevithick was washed ashore at high tide, two days after being reported missing by her husband. Police said she had disembowelled herself with a kitchen knife and then fallen from cliffs near her home. She was still clutching the weapon when found. Villagers are at a loss to explain her action. Her husband was detained in hospital last night, suffering from shock.'

She stopped reading and tossed the cutttings onto the floor.

'I was right,' said Hobson in a low voice, staring into the darkness of his own world. 'It all fits.' His hands were white with tension. His pulse had quickened. *Everything* told him that he was right.

'Do you think they have a TV in this dump?'

Hobson abruptly stood up. Almost angrily he said, 'There is no more time for frivolity, Karianna. There is work for you to do. The woman of the hotel – I can smell it on her. Like corruption. But I must know for sure. You must go and seek on her.'

'What, *now*?' Karianna cried. 'But it's late! And I'm hungry!'

'Now!' Hobson repeated. Under her feigned reluctance he could sense the girl's interest and eagerness. He stood up and began to pace the cramped room. 'I have waited so long for this. I knew it would come again. I knew that if I waited, and watched, I would learn of it. Now it is here, it is strong. But it can be driven back. The foul thing can be destroyed. Some of the people may yet be saved. I *know* the way . . .' His voice rose slightly. 'With your help, Karianna, I can track it and beat it. My sacrifice will have been worthwhile. And I will be free at

last.' He realised that he had almost shouted this last, and stopped, sitting down, suddenly very tired again.

'Then I suppose I'd better go,' said Karianna.

Hobson heard the key turn in the lock, and the door opened and closed behind her.

Gabrielle Danton stood washing herself at the bathroom sink. Part of her mind was on the peculiar blind man, Hobson. She hoped he wasn't some kind of lunatic, the way he had behaved. Still, the little girl seemed normal enough. It was just one of the effects blindness had on you.

As she soaped herself she looked in the mirror at the pattern of faint pink lines across her arms and her sides and her breasts. They had almost healed. She felt an aching emptiness inside her. It had been too long. Surely he would return soon.

She sensed movement out of the corner of her eye, and turned. The bathroom door was just swinging shut: evidently she had forgotten to lock it. She looked outside. There was nobody to be seen in the corridor.

Karianna stood in the shadow of a doorway, pressing herself flat so that she could not be seen. She heard the bathroom door close again and moved out of concealment. She walked noiselessly along the corridor until she was again outside the washroom. Inside she could hear the splash of water as the woman continued to bathe herself.

She stood there for several long minutes, staring at the door, smiling to herself.

Chapter Nine

Peter sat on the headland, looking down at the patterns made by the waves as they lapped gently against the shore far below. From this vantage he could see in two directions. Eastwards, to his left, was the tiny bay which was virtually a private beach for Sele House. Westwards, beyond the harbour, a long strip of beach wound raggedly away, backed by crumbling cliffs. He could see the narrow cliff path, threading its way among stumps of rock. It did not look especially treacherous from this distance. Trees grew close to the cliff tops, but here and there he could see a hint of grey or red brickwork was visible through the foliage.

The sun was already warm on his back, though the sands below were still mostly in shadow. He had woken early, and had banged around in the bathroom and kitchen for a while, but there had been no sign of life from Samantha and her brother, nor from Mary. Unable even to find a jar of coffee in the unfamiliar kitchen, he decided instead to go for a morning walk, followed perhaps by a swim. He had put swimming trunks on under his jeans in readiness.

As he sat he thought back over the previous evening. Surely he couldn't be mistaken? Samantha had been giving him all kinds of positive signals. If Mary hadn't been there . . . But of course Mary had been there, and she had certainly noticed what was going on, and had been very cool towards Samantha. No wonder, really, with her behaving like that and Andrew hardly cold in his grave. Peter's mind went back to his first sight of Samantha, a few months earlier. Obviously she was some kind of nymphomaniac . . . but, he had to confess, she was *exactly* the kind of nymphomaniac, if so, that he had always dreamed of meeting . . .

Damn it, though, she's Andrew's widow! The wife of my oldest friend, who we're supposed to be mourning. This shouldn't be happening.

Conflicting feelings of desire and guilt tussled inconclusively inside him.

Peter was shaken out of his train of thought by the sight of a line of men making their way away from him along the western beach. He hadn't seen them approach: they must have used a cliff descent hidden from his line of sight. It was obvious that they were searching – they moved very slowly, a couple of arm's lengths apart from each other, and at frequent intervals one or the other of them would squat down to examine something in the sand. Occasionally something would appear to be lifted gingerly and placed in a bag. He quickly guessed that they were policemen, though none of them was in uniform.

Puzzled, Peter watched as the men receded into the distance. What were they looking for? He thought vaguely that perhaps it had something to do with drug smuggling.

He decided that it was time to go down to the beach himself, parts of which were now bright yellow in sunlight. He got up, realising as he did so that the dew-damp turf had made the seat of his trousers clammy.

The path down to the little bay was steep but well-trodden: it made for easy scrambling, though from time to time Peter slid a few feet, and his shoes quickly filled with bits of earth and small pebbles.

When he reached the beach he removed socks and shoes and stepped barefoot on to the sand. Here, above the tideline, the sand was fine and dry and dragged aginst his feet. It was also clean: no cigarette ends, no cellophane wrappings, no discarded beach sandals – none of the detritus usually abandoned by thoughtless holidaymakers.

Peter walked on to the damp, packed sand of the littoral, experiencing the special pleasure of being the first person to leave footmarks on an expanse of beach. There was a sharp, heady tang of salt and ozone in the air. Here and there clumps of bladder-wrack trailed across the sand, already turning black as they began to dry out, and exuding a heavy, iodine-rich odour. The smells of the seashore always released powerful

memory associations, chiefly from childhood. He had a sudden, vivid flash of himself and Mary and Andrew on Brighton beach, one afternoon when they were students, the two men showing off by clambering among the palings under the West Pier. He remembered the slimy feel of the rotting wood and involuntarily wiped his hands on his trousers.

Reaching the middle of the beach, Peter stopped and wheeled slowly around. A row of little heaps of scuffed sand marked his trail; otherwise there was no sign that any other human had ever been here. The cliffs enclosed the tiny bay on three sides like cupped hands. Overhead was a patch of clear, deep blue sky, with the sun blindingly brilliant. A pair of herring gulls swooped, their piercing cries echoing and re-echoing. Peter inhaled deeply, putting aside all thoughts of the strange, disturbing or tragic events which had happened since he first came to Penthor, and feeling at peace.

On the further side of the beach there was an area of fallen rock where, at some remote point in the past, part of the cliff had collapsed. Peter clambered among the boulders, barnacles digging painfully into his soles, and settled himself on a flat stone overlooking a rock pool. He watched as its microcosm of marine life went about its daily business: small fish darting among the weeds; transparent, nearly invisible prawns propelling themselves with sudden flicks of their tails; crabs venturing cautiously, mandibles working, from the security of crevices.

So preoccupied was he that he did not notice Samantha making her way down the cliff path, and was unaware of her presence until a flash of movement registered in his peripheral vision.

She was at the other side of the little bay and showed no sign of having seen Peter, who was half-hidden by boulders. As he watched she slipped off her jeans and T-shirt. Underneath she wore only bikini briefs. She ran down the beach, hair streaming, breasts bouncing, and plunged into the surf, swimming easily and powerfully into the deeper water.

Peter watched with a sense of slightly guilty, voyeuristic excitement. He was debating what to do next – whether to stay in partial concealment, or join her in the water, or slip away

quietly – when Samantha swam back in his direction and called out, 'Why don't you come on in?' His eyes locked with hers, which seemed to have become enormous: violet wells which drew him irresistibly towards her. Suddenly all doubts were banished: he stripped down to his trunks, raced down the few yards of sand, and splashed into the shockingly cold water.

As he submerged himself, waiting for his skin to attune itself to the water temperature, she swam nearer.

'I didn't think you'd seen me,' he said.

'There's a trail of footprints leading right across the beach. Nobody else comes here. I knew it was you.'

Samantha spoke in a normal, light tone, but as she came close to him Peter felt himself, once again, in the grip of some strange force that radiated from her. It was partly her powerful sexual aura, but it was more than that. He felt distanced from the conversation and events, as though he was an observer rather than a particpant, watching from a remote isolated corner of his brain. There was a faint distant buzzing in his ears. He vaguely remembered a similar feeling he had once experienced when experimenting with hypnosis, watching with detached surprise as his arm moved, seemingly independently, at the hypnotist's instruction. *It's me doing that,* he had thought. *How odd!* Now he could not escape from her gaze: he was trapped by the power in her huge, startling, bottomless eyes. And there was something in the way Samantha moved which reminded him abstractly of a predatory animal – elegant, graceful and deadly. He thought with puzzled surprise that he ought to be terrified of this woman, though he could not imagine why.

She came up to him, in water that covered her shoulders and his chest. They did not speak. Her nipples brushed against his stomach. Her hand stroked his groin lightly, bringing an instant response that surged through him like an electric shock. Peter clasped her to him automatically. Samantha's hands went to his back, then to his shoulders, where her fingers came into contact with the scar Andrew had left on him. She traced its outline, and as she did so Peter felt an actual chill pass through her body, as if she had been washed with ice. She shuddered, and Peter saw her eyes flare and lips draw back in a fleeting

expression of unbelievable fury. The look passed, and reality snapped back into full focus for him. Samantha looked up at him with eyes from which the glow had faded.

'The scar . . . how did you get it?' she asked.'

'Andrew did it when I first came here. Some sort of blood-brother thing he wanted us to go through. It was very odd.'

'Andrew – ?' She threw back her head and laughed, a sound full of sudden joy and, it seemed, an element of relief. 'Andrew! He must have . . . oh, that's amazing.'

Peter looked at her in some bafflement. 'You know why he did it? I wish you'd tell me!'

'It's . . . very complicated. I can't explain now. But it shows how much he cared about you.' She drew him closer again, nuzzled his chest. 'And I can see why.'

Peter half-heartedly attempted to disengage himself, although he wanted to do just the opposite. 'Look,' he said, 'we shouldn't be here, like this. You're Andrew's wife . . . widow. We ought to be in mourning.'

'Andrew was ill for a long time, Peter. We were happy together. I loved him. I miss him. But I need somebody now he's gone, and I want you. Andrew knew this would happen, believe me. That's why he did this' – she tapped the scar – 'to make it all right. Believe me.' She looked up at him, her eyes seeming again to glow momentarily. 'Don't you want to make love to me?'

Peter sighed. 'Of course I do. There wouldn't be any problem if I *didn't*. But it doesn't seem right . . . I wish you'd explain . . .' His voice trailed off uncertainly. *For God's sake*, he told himself, *don't fight it. She might change her mind!*

'Come on,' Samantha said, and she led him by the hand into the shallower water, towards the cliff beyond the rock-fall. Peter followed unresistingly. He saw that there was a fold of rock, beyond which lay a tiny shelf of sand completely hidden from any landward vantage.

They lay down together. Peter went to embrace Samantha, but she pressed his arms to his sides, whispering, 'Don't move'. He relaxed, eyes half-shut in the bright sunlight, as she traced the lines of his body with lips and fingers, bringing him to a trembling state of excitement. She pulled down the front of his

trunks, caressed his member, then dipped her head and took it in her mouth. Peter watched her mass of dark hair, groaning involuntarily as waves of intense sensation spread outwards from his groin. He reached out and cupped one breast, rubbing and tweaking the hard nipple. Samantha shifted position slightly, to allow him to slide her briefs down her legs; then she kicked them aside, swivelled to face him, and without further preamble straddled him and slipped him inside her. Peter was amazed by the heat of her: it was like penetrating a moist furnace. He gasped as she moved on him, rotating her hips; her vaginal muscles rippled and gripped him with a control he would hardly have believed humanly possible. She leaned backwards, shaking her head from side to side, sweat tricking between her breasts. Peter stroked her flanks, trying to hold himself back, but his orgasm overtook him swiftly and explosively. He lay exhausted, his heart palpitating as if he had just run a mile; there was a salty taste of blood in his throat. Samantha leaned forward, brushing tangled hair from her face, and smiled. 'How was that?'

'How did you and Andrew meet?'

They lay in Samantha and Andrew's bed, a tangled sheet loosely draped over their legs. They had dressed and made their way back to the house, where they had retreated to the master bedroom and made love repeatedly, with a slowness and exquisiteness of sensation which for Peter fell just short of agony. He had lost all track of time, but long afternoon shadows now lay across the carpet.

She looked at him. 'I came to Penthor. We met. It all happened very quickly.'

'Where are you from? I know so little about you.'

Samantha smiled. 'It's not important, is it? I prefer not to talk about it.'

Peter shrugged. 'Just curious. Will you stay in Penthor? It's a bit of an odd sort of place.'

Samantha looked at him intently. 'How do you mean, odd?'

'Unfriendly. Funny goings on. Like that woman at the funeral. Or that boat washed ashore when I first came.' *Or Andrew,* he thought. *Or you, Samantha*

She nodded. 'No, I won't stay here. Not now Andrew's dead. There's no need. We just have to clear up one or two things, and then we'll leave. Daniel will be less happy to leave, but he'll go. He'll have to . . .'

'Daniel, yes. No offence, but your brother's a bit of an oddity himself. Keeps himself to himself. You'd hardly know he was here most of the time.'

'No, he doesn't go out much.'

'Where will you go? I'd like to visit . . .'

Samantha laughed. 'No, Peter. I don't think you would. I've enjoyed our time together, but when we leave we won't see each other again. And you won't miss me.'

'Of course I will,' he protested.

'No. You'll have other things to think about.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean Mary. Don't pretend, Peter. I've seen the way you look at each other. I've never seen two people so obviously in love with each other.'

Peter was appalled at what Samantha was saying. He sat bolt upright and stared at her. 'Mary! In love with *Mary?* She's my *cousin!*'

'So? Cousins can be in love, can't they?'

'It's not true. I've known Mary since we were children. I always thought she'd settle with Andrew, to be honest – '

'And that made you jealous.'

'No! Certainly not. Well . . . a little . . . in a childish sort of way. I like Mary. She's very attractive. But I've never thought of her in *that* way . . .'

Even as he spoke he knew it wasn't true. How interesting, the way his voice raised itself in defence, even though his mind knew she was right. He felt threatened by her words, infuriated by her calm confidence in what she was hinting. And that, he silently acknowledged, was because she had seen something that both he and Mary had always denied.

Samantha's physical attractiveness was overwhelming, but it was his cousin who was always somewhere in the back of his thoughts; his cousin with whom there was a far deeper emotional entanglement than he could ever feel for Andrew's beautiful and strange widow.

Yet he had never quite believed that Mary felt the same. He thought back to the evening at the Bay View Hotel, watching surreptitiously through a crack in the door as Mary changed. Had she known that he could see? He had assumed not; had assumed, with that incident as with various others, that it was mere accident, with no signals being conveyed. If he was wrong, then he had been blind for years . . .

He lay back again, smiling. If it was true, that he and Mary were hiding an interest in each other, then that was for the future. First and foremost, now, was Samantha. Her casually announced intention of leaving filled him with an icy dread.

His mind whirled: Samantha, Mary. He wanted somehow to have both.

But, speaking of Mary, where was she?

The house had been deserted when they returned from the beach, both Daniel and Mary having apparently gone out, together or separately. Peter supposed that Mary had walked into town; in any event, there was nothing to be bothered about, and other things were uppermost in his mind. But he would have expected her to have returned by now.

'Mary ought to be back,' he said, climbing out of bed and starting to pull on his clothes. 'I wonder where she is? Would Daniel have taken her somewhere?'

'No,' Samantha said, dressing herself. 'Daniel has other business to attend to. He won't be around today. She's probably just been shopping.'

'Maybe I should go into Penthor, have a look.'

At that moment a door opened and slammed downstairs. Peter walked on to the landing, tucking his shirt into his jeans. He was about to call out, when an incoherent shouting made him realise that whoever was downstairs was not Mary. It was a man, and he was angry.

Peter hurried downstairs, Samantha close behind him. The noise was now coming from the sitting room. There was a sound of china smashing.

Peter moved quietly into the room. A man was at the far side, sweeping a row of Andrew's valuable pottery figures on to the hard floor, where they shattered. He was muttering 'Bastards, bastards', in a continuous litany which occasionally

rose to a shout. Something alerted the man to their presence. He spun . . . and Peter froze as he saw that the intruder was carrying a shotgun. The weapon was old, the barrels pocked with rust, but their twin snouts looked deadly enough as they swung to and fro between Peter and Samantha, wavering only slightly as the man's hands shook.

He was in his early fifties Peter judged, and he did not look like a burglar or a madman. His silvery hair, though now dishevelled, was carefully cut, and his suit was smartly tailored. In other circumstances he might have been taken for a bank manager. But his eyes were wild with pain and hatred, red-rimmed from obvious weeping. He looked insanely determined.

'*You!*' he said to Samantha, almost spitting the word. '*You* killed her. You and that devil brother of yours!'

'I don't know what you mean, Mr Trevithick,' said Samantha calmly.

'Don't play games with me. She's dead – and you're responsible. You're going to pay.' He hefted the gun threateningly.

'Now wait a minute – ' Peter began.

'Keep quiet, you. I don't know you, and I don't know if I've any quarrel with you, but you're *here,* with *her,* and that's enough for me. If you move, or try to interfere, you'll get one barrel of this. At this range it'll blow your face right off.'

As he spoke, Trevithick jerked the gun in Peter's direction, and he saw that the man's finger was curled around the trigger. Keeping his voice as calm as he could, he said, 'But I don't understand. Who's dead? And what's it got to do with us?'

'Lucy. My wife. She was washed ashore days ago. Don't you read the papers?'

Peter remembered the line of men searching the foreshore. So that was what they were looking for: clues.

'Dr Brosnan said she probably killed herself,' Trevithick continued, 'and maybe she did, but it was her that caused it – ' gesturing at Samantha – 'her and her brother. Ever since they came to Penthor there's been evil in this place, and it won't stop till someone gets rid of them.'

Peter considered the man's words. Obviously what he was

saying about Samantha was ridiculous, though her apparent promiscuity might have made a few waves in this staid community. But Daniel? Daniel was an enigma: even Samantha was evasive about him. Could it be because her brother was some kind of psychotic?

'Where is he? Where's Daniel?' Trevithick demanded.

'He's not here. He'll be back later.' As Samantha spoke her eyes strayed, as if involuntarily, to the French doors behind Trevithick. As a ruse to distract his attention it was too obvious, Peter thought, but the man's eyes flickered briefly to one side, and as they did so there was a whirring sound and something flashed through the air from near to Samantha, striking Trevithick's head with a sickeningly loud, wet crunch. The impact knocked him screaming sideways, and the shotgun went off with a noise that was deafening in the enclosed space. Shot peppered the wall to Peter's left, exploding picture frames in a shower of crystal splinters. Trevithick fell to his knees, clutching the side of his head and making a shrill, keening sound of pain and fear.

Peter moved forward in bafflement. In front of Trevithick on the floor lay one of Andrew's samurai swords, its blade bloody. He glanced back at the wall. The place where it had hung was six feet to Samantha's right. How had she managed to grab it and throw it with such accuracy, when he hadn't even seen her move?

Trevithick looked up, and Peter saw the hideous injury the sword had inflicted. A wide vertical cut ran down the side of his head, blood pulsing thickly from it where arteries had been severed. His hands sought vainly to hold the wound closed, and Peter had the horrible impression that if he let go his head would fall open, like a piece of fruit sliced in two.

He gave Peter an imploring look, through eyes clouded with pain. He tried to speak, coughed blood, then said thickly, 'Evil. *Evil.*' Then he lurched to his feet and, moaning, stumbled to the French doors, somehow opened them, and disappeared from the house.

Samantha stepped forward and knelt briefly by the fallen sword. She touched the blood-sodden carpet and came away with a crimson hand, which she examined with detached interest.

'We must go after him,' Peter said. 'Call an ambulance. He might die. It was self-defence,' he added, 'anyone can see that.'

'Yes,' said Samantha. 'You make the call. I'll look for him.' She slid with animal grace across the room and was gone

The woodland basked peacefully in the late afternoon sunlight; the only sounds were bursts of birdsong and the tiny rustlings of small animals moving cautiously and quietly in the undergrowth. Then, intruding into the tranquillity, gradually growing louder, came other sounds, discordant, out of place: the crashing noise of broken twigs and crushed undergrowth; a harsh, ragged sobbing.

The man stumbled through the wood, one hand clasped to his head, his face a bloody mask. He moved clumsily, like a drunkard, lurching from side to side, falling sometimes to his knees. Behind him lay a trail of trampled plants, highlighted here and there by glistening splashes of scarlet blood. The noises he made were random, inarticulate, barely human. From time to time he glanced behind him.

His pursuer was as silent as a gliding shadow, moving through the trees so lightly and surely that the crouching animals were unaware of her passing. A vortex of light wind swirled the fallen leaves in her wake.

The man never sensed her approach. One moment he was stumbling ahead; the next he stopped still as she stepped in front of him from behind a tree. He had no time to speak, or even to cry out. She reached forward, laying her hand on his cheek as if in benediction. There was no effort in her movements, yet under her touch his head rotated slowly, inexorably, until his terror-struck eyes were staring back almost directly behind him. There was a loud crack as his neck snapped, and his body went limp. She held him upright for a moment, with one outstretched hand, then let the corpse fall like a discarded doll. She melted into the trees.

The wood was silent again. When the ambulance arrived Peter was surprised to discover that its only occupants were the priest, who introduced himself as Reverend Roberts, and the doctor. He invited them into the house, but they suggested

instead that they take the path round to the back. Peter walked with them, explaining quickly what had happened. The two men listened silently, then conferred in low voices. They stood by the French doors, looking inside at the disarray in the sitting room, but showed no inclination to go indoors and examine it more carefully. Instead they walked across the lawn towards the woods, following the path Trevithick and Samantha had taken.

'What about the police?' Peter said. There would surely have to be an investigation.

'I don't think we want the police brought in,' Dr Brosnan said. Unless, that is, you want charges brought against Mr Trevithick . . .?'

'No, not now . . . I just thought . . .'

'There has been enough bad publicity for this village lately,' said Reverend Roberts. 'We don't want the gutter press getting hold of this and blowing it out of all proportion.'

The doctor nodded. 'It's time there was an end to it. He was obviously mad with grief. He acted foolishly, and by the sound of it has paid enough of a price.'

They reached the outermost stand of trees. 'You go back to the house, Mr Conway,' said the priest. 'Somebody may return there. We'll search.'

The men turned away in blatant gesture of dismissal. Peter walked back to the house, confused and somewhat baffled. He dithered inside, unsure what to do about the mess in the sitting room. He couldn't stay in the room as it was, with all the debris and the blood congealing in a brown puddle, yet he felt that to clear up was to destroy what should be important evidence. He left the room as it was, went upstairs, and sat at his bedroom window, staring out towards the woods.

After a while the two men emerged, carrying a body between them. The doctor had draped his jacket over the figure's chest and head; it was clear from the limply dangling limbs and the unceremonious way in which they carried him that the man was dead.

They walked as swiftly as they could around the side of the house. Peter moved towards the landing, expecting a ring at the doorbell, but instead all he heard was the ambulance motor start up and the vehicle drive away.

He went back to his room, puzzling. There was no sign of Samantha . . . or, he suddenly remembered, of Mary. He felt he should go looking for one of them; at the same time he didn't feel able to leave the house in case the other turned up. On the face of it Samantha was the one more likely to be in need of aid: she had just killed a man, after all, albeit in self-defence. Yet, oddly, it was Mary he felt more concerned about. Samantha had seemed so unruffled . . . but on the other hand, he couldn't walk down into Penthor in search of his sister while Samantha was still gone, presumably wandering the cliffs somewhere.

The sun sank as he sat, wrestling with his indecision. The light grew hazy and began to fade. It was past eight o'clock before he heard a noise at the front door. He bounded downstairs and found Mary letting herself in. She looked withdrawn, depressed.

'Where have you *been?*' he said.

Mary looked at him dully. 'Walking. Down by the harbour. I thought I might see you there.'

'I was . . planning to come down after you,' he said, telling himself it was only partly a lie. 'But I couldn't . . .'

Peter led his cousin through to the sitting room, detailing the confrontation with Trevithick. Mary listened quietly. She surveyed the chaos in the room, shivered, rubbed her bare arms. 'Why don't we go outside?' she suggested.

'It's getting dark. It'll be chilly.'

'Never mind. I'd sooner be outside than in here . . . with this.'

They walked out on to the lawn. The trees were black outlines against a fast-fading sky. A cool wind blew off the sea. Peter put his arm round Mary's shoulder: her skin was cool, goose-pimpled to the touch. After a few seconds her arm slipped round his waist in response. He was disturbingly conscious of her proximity, her scent. His conversation with Samantha was fresh in his mind.

'Let's go away from here,' she said, as they walked around the lawn's perimeter. 'I don't like it.'

'In a day or two,' he said, reassuringly.

'I don't want to wait a day or two . . . This place is beginning to frighten me. There's something dangerous about it.'

'Dangerous? You mean what happened here today?'

'There's that but . . . no, not really. I've had this feeling all day.'

'You're upset about Andrew.'

'Of course I am. But it's not that either. It's other things. All that odd business at the funeral. And Daniel – ' She explained about Daniel's appearance in her room, and how she had followed him.

'I thought maybe you'd gone out with him today.'

She shot him a look of surprise. *Daniel?* No I haven't seen him.' She sighed. 'Look, Peter, maybe it's just me being silly, but I'd really like to get away from here.'

'We can't just up and leave Samantha.'

'Can't we?' Suddenly her arm was no longer around his waist. They stopped walking, and Peter turned to face her.

'She's Andrew's widow, Mary. She needs support at a time like this.'

Mary's face, pale in the grey light, looked stubborn and miserable. 'She's got Daniel.'

'From what we've seen, he may be more of a liability than an asset.'

'Maybe. But she wants *you*.'

What makes you say that?' Peter said uneasily.

'Oh, come on, Peter: the way she was looking at you yesterday I was surprised she didn't jump across the table and rip your clothes off there and then.'

If you only knew! Peter thought. But he only said, playfully, testingly: 'Jealous?'

Her eyes dropped. 'Please don't make fun of me, Peter.'

Christ! he thought, his feelings a mixture of surprise and triumph. She *is* jealous. He took her by the shoulders, a firm, friendly embrace. 'Look, just a few more days, until things have settled. Then back to London. Okay?'

She looked up at him, her expression almost despairing. 'She's got you, hasn't she, Peter? You couldn't leave now if you wanted to. She's trapped you.'

Peter made a blustering denial, but inside he realised that Mary was right.

It was nearly midnight before Samantha returned. Mary had excused herself and gone to bed early, giving Peter a cool, sisterly peck on the cheek. He moved an easy chair into the

kitchen, and settled there to wait. By the time she came in he was dozing: he opened his eyes to find her standing over him. She looked composed, even radiant.

'He's dead,' he said.

'I know, I saw them find him.'

'Christ, Samantha, where have you *been?*'

I'm sorry, Peter. I had to be by myself for a while. Look, I'm really tired, let's talk about it some other time.'

With that she went upstairs. After a few minutes Peter followed. He lay on his bed for a long time, tired but awake, turning the day's events and conversation's over and over in his mind. Mary was right, he knew: there were strange things going on. Yet he did not feel as worried as intellectually he knew he should. Was that to do with Samantha? Was it all too much for his mind to cope with at once? Two images kept recurring: the doctor and the priest, on the foreshore in the spring; and again, carrying the body out of the woods earlier. They seemed to have a grip on what was going on. As he drifted into sleep he vowed to find out what they knew.

Chapter Ten

The church was dim and cool, weak sunlight slanting through the dusty side windows. Reverend Roberts intoned the prayers of Morning Service in a practised professional monotone, the conclusion of each being answered with a ragged chorus of 'Aamerns' from the half-dozen elderly worshippers clustered in the front pews. Peter perched uncomfortably at the rear, gazing at the cobwebbed roof vaults, waiting for the service to end. It was years since he had attended any church service apart from weddings or funerals, but the rituals forcibly reminded him of countless dull childhood Sundays, the monotonous litanies seeming to stretch the minutes into hours.

Eventually the priest reached the familiar closing prayer, and the tiny congregation shuffled its arthritic way to the door. Reverend Roberts had by this time circled round to the entrance and stood shaking hands with his frail flock as they left, enquiring solicitously as to ailments and relatives. Peter hung back patiently until the clergyman and he were alone. As he stepped forward, Reverend Roberts gave him a cold, forbidding look, his face hawklike and immobile.

'I need to talk to you,' Peter said.

'I have a great many things to attend to. Perhaps we can arrange an appointment . . .'

'I need to talk to you *now*. There are things going on here that I don't understand. I must talk to somebody.'

The priest gave him a searching stare, seeming to weigh his words with great care. Finally he sighed, and his face relaxed slightly. 'Very well. Come through to my office.'

They walked round the side of the church, and through a small doorway at the base of the tower. It led directly into an untidy, homely room, whose main features were a battered old

desk, an overcrowded bookcase, and an ancient bicycle. Reverend Roberts removed his surplice, hanging it behind a second door which plainly led into the church. He slipped into an old tweed jacket with leather elbow patches. He took one of the room's two cheap bentwood chairs, and gestured Peter to sit in the other.

'How well did you know Andrew deSolla?' the priest asked abruptly, before Peter could speak.

'Very well, up until three or four years ago. But we'd drifted apart, and I hadn't seen him for years until I came down here in the spring.'

'You were here in the spring?'

'Don't you remember? We met.'

Reverend Roberts looked blank, and Peter realised that, of course, he didn't connect him with the rain-soaked individual he had encountered briefly on that dramatic night.

'There was a boat washed ashore. Three bodies in it.'

'You were there?' The priest looked surprised, then thoughtful. 'Yes, I remember somebody . . . Taking photographs . . .'

'That was me.'' Peter said. 'I should also tell you that I went up to the doctor's house that evening, and I saw one of the bodies laid out there. It was perfectly preserved.'

The priest looked at him angrily. 'What were you doing? Snooping around?'

'I do some journalism. I thought there was a story. And I was right, wasn't I?'

'Just an oddity,' the priest said cautiously. 'Sea water has preservative qualities sometimes.'

'On one body out of three?' Peter shook his head. 'I saw the others, don't forget. And the reason I went up to the doctor's was that you seemed to be acting secretively . . . But anyway, that's just one thing. Then there was the funeral – you conducted it like no other service I've ever seen. Then that man yesterday, accusing Samantha deSolla and her brother of murder, and of being evil.'

The priest stared at him for a moment. 'How well do you know her? And Daniel?'

Peter felt himself flushing at the question, and hoped his face

was not revealing too much. 'This spring was the first time I met Samantha . . . the only time until this week. I met Daniel for the first time a couple of days ago.'

The priest steepled his fingers, elbows resting on knees. He considered Peter's words for long seconds. His face looked lined and drawn, suddenly the face of an old man.

'Very well,' he said, at length. 'Supposing I told you that I have every reason to think that Andrew deSolla was responsible for the deaths of those three people in the boat –'

'Andrew – ?'

'Wait! Let me finish. And that if Jeremy Trevithick, rest his soul, said that Mrs deSolla and her brother killed Lucy, I would be inclined to say that he knew what he was talking about. Suppose I told you that?'

Peter felt himself breathless with shock. It was one thing to hear such charges from the mouth of a man clearly wild with grief; another to be confronted calmly with them by a clergyman. He felt outraged, yet aware that his outrage was tinged with defensiveness. 'I'd say those are very serious charges. What proof do you have? Why aren't they under arrest, if that's true?'

'It isn't a matter of simple *crime* we are talking about here, Mr Conway. It isn't a matter of motive and opportunity and fingerprints and clues. It's an evil force we're confronting, a force that threatens Penthor, and I fear that your friends are at the heart of it.'

'Evil force? That sounds like superstitious nonsense, I'm afraid.'

'Perhaps so. We are accustomed to dismissing superstition these days, Mr Conway. Perhaps on the whole that is a good thing. But it leaves us sadly unprepared to deal with such things when they do arise. And they *do* arise. You must believe that I am completely serious, and I am not a superstitious man.'

'But Andrew . . .? And Samantha . . .? It's absurd –'

'You said you had fallen out of touch with your friend. Didn't you know of his interest in the paranormal, and the occult?'

'He did research in parapsychology. I know that, but that was science, not mumbo-jumbo.'

'He worked with a man called Geoffrey Carlyle,' the priest said, and his face shadowed as he said the name. 'Did you know him?'

'I heard of him. He's quite eminent. I never met him.'

'Carlyle lived here for many years, in Sele House. He was a scholar of the occult. You don't have to take my word for that: he wrote books on the subject when he was young – authoritative books. Later, he gave up writing about it – but he never gave up his studies. It's my belief that he stopped publishing books when he started to go beyond theory into practical experiment . . .'

'*Witchcraft*, you mean?' Peter could not suppress a note of incredulity.

'Not in the sense you mean: no dancing naked round an open fire. That's *News of the World* fantasy. No, I mean the real thing: necromancy, true magic. Controlling the forces of evil in the world.'

Despite himself, Peter found that he was beginning to find the priest's matter-of-fact tone convincing. It was the kind of study that might have appealed to Andrew's intense, unconventional mind. 'And you think he brought Andrew into it?'

'I have no doubt about it. And not just deSolla. Palmer – the man whose body you saw – was another student whom Carlyle brought down here. Samantha deSolla may, I think, be another. Her brother too.'

'But if this has been going on all this time, why haven't you done anything about it?'

'Ah, but until recently there was nothing to act on, nothing to speak of. Carlyle always kept himself to himself. He didn't want to draw attention. There were certain happenings . . . odd events . . . but nothing really harmful. Intervening might have made matters worse. But he died last year – nothing suspicious about that; he was a very old man – and since then things have been getting out of hand. Deaths and more deaths. I think deSolla may somehow have overreached himself, meddled with forces he was not able to control. Something is happening now which makes me very afraid, Mr Conway, and I fear that you are involved in it, whether you know it or not.'

Peter looked at the clergyman, and realised that he was not

exaggerating when he spoke of fear. His eyes confirmed it: they testified to levels of dread which went far beyond ordinary human fright. Reverend Roberts was a haunted, terrified man. 'But what are you doing about it, Reverend?'

'Until now, very little. To put it simply, my job is to protect my flock, by which I mean the ordinary villagers of Penthor. I chose not to try to combat these . . . other forces. Perhaps that was cowardice; I prefer to think it was realism. I know I am an ordinary man. With the help of one or two others –'

'Dr Brosnan?'

'Chiefly the doctor, yes – with their help I have tried to keep things quiet. As long as harm only befell those who knowingly pursued such studies I thought it was the wise course: if they brought harm on themselves, it was the price they paid for pursuing their chosen path.'

'An unforgiving view for a clergyman.'

The priest reacted with a sudden blaze of righteous anger. 'What forgiveness should there be for those seeking after such knowledge?' Then he drew in on himself, his body seeming to diminish, become frail. He buried his head in his hands. 'But now,' he said, voice shaking, 'all these deaths . . . I don't know . . .'

'Still, I'm sure you're wrong about Andrew and Samantha,' Peter said. 'I've seen no sign of occult goings on at Sele House.'

But as he spoke his mind filled with an image. *Andrew, holding a strange knife, incising a mysterious cicatrice on his back.*

'Perhaps not,' the priest said. 'I am sure these things are kept well hidden from casual eyes. And the houses may have other protections, against more serious investigation.'

'Houses?'

'There's Palmer's house too. Up on the west cliffs, along Lang's Fell path.'

'Who lives there now?'

'Nobody. It's been deserted since he disappeared. At least, I suppose so.'

'You haven't been there?'

'*Been* there? The priest laughed, a sound without mirth. 'No. Nobody's been there.'

'Surely you'd find your answers there?'

'I told you, Mr Conway, I haven't been looking for answers. I've been trying to avoid thinking of the questions. That may have to change. But, to me, those houses are enemy territory, and I would not set foot in them without full protection. And if you have any sense, you and your cousin will pack your bags and get out of Sele House and leave Penthor and never come back. And hope you never hear of it again.' He got up abruptly, fetched a pair of bicycle clips from a drawer and began to put them on. 'You might even try prayer. I know it's out of fashion, but it can have its uses. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a lot of calls to make.'

Peter followed Reverend Roberts as he wheeled his bike out into the churchyard. The priest mounted his bicycle and pedalled away without another word, leaving Peter to trudge after him. As he walked, Peter noticed a little girl darting among the graves. Her head popped up from behind a headstone, and she looked at him mischievously. She had short black hair and an impish expression. He waved at her. She giggled, vanished behind the carved marble. Seconds later she bobbed up again, running swiftly towards the church gate.

The mortuary door was locked, but that presented little obstacle to William Hobson. He ran his fingers expertly across the door handle and keyhole, took a piece of bent metal from his pocket and inserted if deftly between door and frame. Seconds later he was inside, closing the door behind him.

The place was cool, and smelled strongly of antiseptic. Hobson stood still for a moment, attuning himself to the air currents in the room, coughing lightly to produce a pattern of echoes from which a picture gradually coalesced in his mind. Sighted people were often surprised when the blind failed to stumble clumsily around. Hobson felt only contempt for them. They had five senses, but failed to make good use of any of them. He had only four, but they were trained to a pitch of acuity that most ordinary people could only guess at. To him, they were the cripples.

It was a medium-sized room, roughly square. There was a source of cold air ahead and to his left. In the centre of the room would be the examination table.

He walked forward cautiously, arms outstretched at waist-height. His fingers found the table's edge, and he turned confidently to the side. He walked towards the gentle but insistent icy draught, came to a stop precisely in front of the mortuary cabinet. He investigated its outlines with quick movements.

Four drawers.

He tried all of them in turn, sliding them a few inches on the runners. The inertia told him that only one was occupied. That simplified matters. He slid it outwards to its full extent; there was an exhalation of icy, chemical-laden air that formed beads of condensation on his face and hands.

The corpse was enclosed in a plastic body bag. He explored its outlines, confirming that it was female, then took out a pocket knife and slit through the heavy polypropylene.

It hit him at once.

The stench. The unmistakable odour of evil.

It had been with her, around her, in her. It had consumed her. And she had paid with her life.

William Hobson investigated Lucy Trevithick's cadaver with his fingers, calmly, unsqueamishly. He found the great gash in her abdomen, now stitched up.

Of course. The union always proved fertile. She had felt it growing within her, had known it was no ordinary, human thing.

Hobson began to assemble once again the pieces of his mental jigsaw. He was right about Lucy Trevithick; he knew that now. There was the woman at the hotel, a lucky additional find. There was the wreck of the *Aspidistra*, and the corpse: his first clue, and an unmistakable one. There would be men involved too. And somewhere *they* would be found: the brother and the sister. At the thought, his empty eye sockets tingled with anticipation. He did not know what names they would be using, but he would soon find out.

And then . . .

A sound in the outer building shook him from his thoughts.

Somebody coming through the side door, closing it behind them. Quickly, but without making any hasty movement that might disorient him, make him clumsy, he closed the drawer and moved towards the door. He heard footsteps: a light, childish pattering. William Hobson relaxed. He opened the door, called out Karianna's name in a low, penetrating voice.

Presently she trotted along the corridor. 'Yeuchh,' she said. 'It stinks in here.'

'Hush child. I have found what I sought. Let us leave.'

He released the lock, closed the door behind him. Nobody would suspect his presence: they would assume the plastic bodybag had somehow caught and ripped in the drawer. They moved away, left the building through the side entrance he had eased open earlier. Karianna led him out into the street, after checking that nobody was in sight.

They walked towards the town centre, to outward appearances an ordinary child leading an ordinary blind man. 'So, child,' Hobson said, 'what did you discover?'

'I went up to the churchyard. A man called Conway came to see the priest. I listened at the door. There was that smell, like you told me about. Like at the hotel.'

As Karianna recounted the fragments of conversation she had overheard, Hobson felt the pieces falling into place. This town was ripe, overripe with evil. He had arrived just in time. Everything was coming out into the open. His job would be easier than he had expected.

'This Lang's Fell path,' he said, when Karianna had finished. 'Do you know it, child?'

'I've seen it on the map.'

'We must go there.'

'It says it's dangerous. You'll probably fall off and break your neck.'

He grasped the girl tightly by the shoulder. 'We must go there. *Now*.'

The east cliffs were as treacherous as the warning notices suggested: crumbling sandstone escarpments, every level surface covered in loose soil and rock, every edge friable and threatening to give way under a man's weight. Winds swirled

and gusted capriciously, as if trying to catch the unwary climber off-balance and pluck him from the path. Below Peter Conway and to his right, waves crashed on the tumbled shore. It looked a very long way down and on occasion, as he made his careful way along the disused path, he felt like a tightrope walker, courting death in order to prove his balance and reflexes. Several times he nearly turned back, but decided that it was probably easier to go on: a descent by this route would be even more difficult and dangerous. Every yard of the way he wished he had tried instead to find a landward approach.

By the time he reached the top, inching up steeply-inclined turf riddled with old rabbit-holes and gulls' nests, Peter was breathing hard, his shirt soaked with sweat, exhausted as much by the mental effort as the physical.

Palmer's house was set back about fifty yards from the cliff: a red-brick, slate-roofed Victorian gabled villa, standing amid a clump of mature oak trees. Although there were no obvious external signs of dilapidation – no broken windows or fallen slates – it had an aura of decay. The paths around the house were clotted with leaf mould; grass and weeds waved untended at knee-height. Even in the bright midsummer light if looked cold and forbidding.

Peter circled the house, trying the doors and windows, peering through grimy glass into deserted rooms full of heavy old furniture. Failing to find easy entrance, he picked up a fallen branch and smashed a window, carefully knocking away fragments of jagged glass before reaching inside to release the catch. The casement was firmly stuck, and he had to pull with all his strength until it gave way and swung outwards, skinning his knuckles on the frame as it did so.

Sucking at the droplets of dark blood oozing from his scraped fingers, Peter climbed into the room, treading carefully among the shards of broken glass. The place smelt damp and mouldy, and there were thick layers of dust on every surface. It seemed as if it had been deserted for years rather than months. He explored the downstairs rooms, looking for something – he wasn't sure what – some evidence of strangeness. Everything seemed perfectly ordinary, except that the house seemed wrong as the home of a young man. There was nothing

individual about it, no mark of personality; and there was nothing modern. It reminded Peter of the home of an old maiden aunt of his, which seemed to have survived unaltered from Edwardian days.

He climbed the stairs and began to examine the equally ordinary bedrooms and bathroom. He was just beginning to feel that perhaps he was wasting his time, and that he had been foolish to take Reverend Roberts's fantasies seriously, when he came to a door which was locked. He knelt down and peered through the keyhole, but his vision was blocked by a key in the lock on the inside. Peter puzzled over this, without arriving at an obvious explanation. He hurried down to the kitchen, found some old newspaper, and returned upstairs. It was a simple matter to slide the newspaper under the door, poke the key out of the lock with a pencil, and draw out both paper and key. He opened the door, feeling pleased with his abilities as a house-breaker and amateur detective.

Inside was Palmer's library, an untidy room lined with bookcases and cabinets. Peter ran his eyes across the rows of book spines. Sure enough, most of them seemed to deal with occult subjects – but equally, he noticed, most of them bore the imprints of familiar, respectable publishers. There was nothing conclusively sinister here. Palmer's desk was crammed with papers, which he leafed through half-heartedly, not knowing where to begin among so much possible evidence. He realised that he had naively been hoping to find all the clues he needed neatly laid out in anticipation of his arrival. It might take days or even weeks to find what he was looking for among this cluttered array of Palmer's life and work.

Turning from the desk, he began to explore the various cabinets. One contained an array of candlesticks of unusual design. Another revealed a pair of plain, long, white silk robes, neatly hung on plastic coat-hangers, whose prosaicness undermined any sense of strangeness. A third was empty. Peter puzzled over this then, on an impulse, rapped his knuckles on the rear panel. There was an unmistakably hollow sound. His heart began to pound in anticipation as he tested the panel from side to side and top to bottom. Undoubtedly there was a space behind it.

He began to feel around the perimeter of the panel, looking for a hidden catch. Along the right-hand side it gave slightly under his fingers, except that halfway down was a spot which did not budge. It must be hinged, he supposed, along the left side, and would swing outwards when the catch was released. He tried vainly to find some way of opening it by pressing on the wood; then, losing patience, fetched a heavy candlestick from the other cabinet, and smashed it with all his strength against the panel. The wood splintered, the catch gave way, and the panel swung open, forcing Peter to step backwards out of its path.

A waft of foul-smelling air came from the space behind the cupboard, causing Peter to gag even before he saw what it contained.

There were three shelves. Each of them bore a pair of candlesticks, like the one with which he had broken the lock. Between each pair of candlesticks stood a severed human head. Each head had a two-tined fork driven into it, impaling the eyes.

Peter turned instinctively away, feeling acid bile rising in his throat. Somewhere in the back of his mind a part of him was whispering *Oh God, Oh God* over and over. The hope that everything might prove to be groundless suspicion had now gone for ever.

He forced himself to turn back, to look again at what he had uncovered.

Two of the heads were little more than skulls, with parchment-like mummified skin drawn tightly across their grinning faces. They might have been hundreds of years old. The third was more recent. The flesh was withering, the black lips drawing back from rotting gums; the nose was a decaying ruin. Nevertheless, Peter recognised the head. He had seen it only briefly, through a rain-washed window, but its features had been impressed permanently on his memory.

It was the head of Philip Palmer.

Who had put it here? And why had they driven a fork through the corpse's eyes, and severed the head, before placing it in a hidden cupboard in a locked room in the owner's deserted house?

However he looked at the questions, the answers drew him inexorably to Sele House. If that suspicion was correct, there must be evidence to be found there, hidden somewhere in Andrew deSolla's private rooms.

Peter knew he would have to search until he found it.

Without bothering to conceal the macabre hidden exhibits, Peter turned from the room, breathing heavily. As he stepped into the corridor he saw a flash of movement at the head of the stairs. A wave of pure terror passed through him, and he made an inarticulate noise in his throat. Then a head came into view, grinning at him in a friendly, mischievous way.

He realised it was the little girl he had seen playing in the churchyard.

Had she followed him here?

She disappeared again. 'Hey,' he said. 'Come here!' He ran towards the stairs, shaky with relief. He heard her feet pattering down the staircase, and when he reached the top she had disappeared again.

Did she want to play hide-and-seek? He felt slightly hysterical at the prospect, here, in this house.

Peter followed her downstairs. When he turned towards the kitchen he saw that she was standing in the doorway. Beside her, his hand on her shoulder, was a man: tall, powerful-looking, with receding dark hair and dark glasses, and dressed in a dark suit.

'It's him,' the girl said, addressing her companion.

The stranger half-turned towards him without seeming to look at him, and Peter realised the man was blind. *A blind man?* he thought. *Following me up that path? It's not possible!*

'Good afternoon,' the blind man said, his voice deep and confident.

'Who are you?' Peter replied, his own voice almost a whisper. 'What are you doing here?'

'I am looking for what you have found, Mr Conway', the blind man retorted, and Peter felt another shock of panic that the stranger somehow knew his name.

'What do you mean?' he said uncertainly.

'The evil. It is here. It surrounds you. With my help it can be defeated, driven out, destroyed!' His voice, vibrant and powerful, rose in tone as he spoke: a powerful, fanatical sound

It was too much. Peter shook his head, trying to dispel the whirl of confused thoughts. He knew he couldn't cope with talking to this man, now. Without another word he turned, hurried to the front door, unbolted it and ran from the house.

The blind man stood silently, seeming to watch him go.

Chapter Eleven

Mary spent a long time in the shower, letting the jets of scalding water play over her body, sluicing away some of her tensions and anxieties. Her depression had lifted during the night to some extent. She was still worried about Peter's obvious infatuation with Samantha, and apprehensive of the strange and violent events which seemed to surround them in Penthor. But she was sure that if they could get away, back to London, things would be all right again.

She slowly towelled herself dry, enjoying the feel of soft cotton against her skin. She dressed and, still drying her hair, walked back to her bedroom.

Daniel was sitting on the bed, waiting for her, and the shock of seeing him almost made her heart stop.

As she entered the room he smiled at her and leaned back on one elbow. He seemed to be appraising her very thoughtfully. 'I hope I'm not intruding?' he said.

His smile was so open and infectious that Mary couldn't help but return it, although she felt deeply apprehensive. 'No. It's okay. I'm decent.'

Daniel gave her a look of mock disappointment, which sent an unexpected thrill of sexual tension through her. She walked to the mirror and began to comb her hair, watching his reflection behind her. 'You don't seem to be around much,' she said.

Downstairs she could hear somebody moving about the house: Samantha, she imagined. Or perhaps Peter had come back while she was showering.

Daniel said, 'No. No, I haven't been around much. I've been busy.'

'What with?'

He shrugged, still watching her carefully. 'Various things. Not very interesting.'

His face was open and friendly, his even good looks made unusual by the distinctive eye colour he shared with Samantha. Mary thought of the mysterious, silent figure standing at her doorway in the night: of the Daniel she had followed on that occasion.

'I'm sorry I haven't seen more of you,' he said. 'And your cousin.' The delicate pause told her that the reference to Peter was made only out of politeness.

'We'll both be leaving soon,' Mary said.

Daniel laughed. 'Leaving? Everybody seems to be anxious to get away from this place. Samantha wants to leave too. Me, I'm happy enough here.'

She turned to him, puzzled. 'How can you say that? After Andrew's death, and that business yesterday . . .'

'You don't leave London every time a relative dies, do you? As for superstitious locals –' he shrugged again. 'I don't let them worry me.'

'I don't like it,' Mary said. She was reluctant to explain further since Samantha and Daniel were part of her unease.

He stood up from the bed and came over to her, a couple of quick, lithe steps. He moved with fluid grace. Mary thought irrelevantly that he might be a dancer.

'You don't seem to have much fun, do you?' Daniel murmured as he stared at her. Mary felt her legs go shaky. 'Unlike your cousin. He and Samantha seem to have hit it off in a big way.' He smiled. 'You ought to enjoy yourself more, an attractive girl like you.'

Absurdly, she felt herself blushing. His proximity disturbed her. He had a slight, distinctive scent, which she felt triggering all kinds of unexpected hormonal responses throughout her body.

'You remind me a bit of Peter,' he continued. 'I can see why Samantha likes him so much.' He had put his hands on her shoulders, stroking them lightly: not too demanding a gesture, but one which couldn't be disregarded.

'Please –' Mary began, starting to move away, to break the contact, fighting against part of herself which wanted to do anything but discontinue it.

'Look at me,' Daniel said, in a low, commanding voice. Mary turned her face to his. A half-smile played around his lips, but it was his eyes that dominated her attention. They seemed to have grown very large, and to have acquired enormous depth. She could not break away from his gaze. His hands moved gently across her shoulders and arms, and she felt a terrifying loss of self-control.

Is this what happens? she thought. *Is this what it's like?*

A voice was calling her name from far away. She listened to it, absently, dreamily. It was Peter's voice, summoning her from downstairs. Peter . . .

Abruptly she was shaken back into normality. Daniel shot a furious look towards the doorway, then stalked to the window. Peter continued to call out.

'All right! I'm coming!' Mary shouted in reply. She turned to Daniel, not sure if she should apologize, or make a joke, or what, but he was staring intently outside, his back to her. He seemed to be trembling, as if with suppressed rage.

Mary found Peter in the kitchen. He had pushed back the table and pulled aside the rug on which it stood to expose a trap-door, which was now propped open. Mary could see crude wooden stairs leading down into a cellar. The smell of musty, stale air pervaded the kitchen. Peter looked at her as she entered the room, his expression grim.

'Where have you been?'

She said bluntly, 'Talking to Daniel.'

'To *Daniel* . . .?' For a moment his gaze wandered past her and he seemed confused by what she had said. She cut across his train of thought.

'What is it? A wine cellar?'

His attention snapped back to her and he nodded. 'Originally, I suppose. But you don't hide away a wine cellar so it can hardly be found. It took me half an hour to find this entrance. *And* I was searching.'

'Why?'

'I'll show you.' Peter stepped towards the ladder, gingerly feeling his way onto the rungs. 'Come on.'

He disappeared down the hatch. Mary moved across and

looked down. His face was turned up towards her, a couple of feet below floor level. Yellow light from some hidden source outlined the entrance to a passageway. Peter ducked into it, disappearing from view.

Mary hesitated for a moment, then followed him down. The passage was lined with rough, whitewashed brickwork and illuminated by a single unshaded light bulb. A few feet ahead of her it turned at right angles, taking her, she calculated, underneath the library.

The room it opened into was a complete surprise. Mary had been envisaging a dusty, unfinished cellar area. Instead she found herself on the threshold of a fully appointed Victorian study-cum-laboratory. The walls were panelled in dark mahogany and lined with bookcases filled with bulky leather-bound volumes. To one side was a work bench covered with glass retorts, flasks and other glass and potteryware, all highly coloured. On the shelves behind it were rows of neatly labelled bottles and jars. A glass-fronted cabinet displayed an almost ceremonial array of instruments, including knives, swords and sharpened, inscribed sticks. The floor was highly polished parquetry. Inlaid into the wood, apparently in brass, was a carefully worked pattern consisting of two concentric circles, within which were an array of strange characters and designs. Except for four small braziers standing at the compass points, no furniture or rug touched the outer circle. The inner circle was perhaps ten feet across and in its centre stood a heavy old desk, on which books and papers were neatly stacked.

Mary looked around her in puzzlement. The very existence of the room – hidden away where there should only be a cellar – was a conundrum. Strange-looking vessels and ornaments stood on shelves and side tables. All of them appeared to have been designed for particular functions, but none of them were in the least familiar.

The circles, however, she feared she recognised. She had often seen similar-looking designs in films.

It was a *pentacle* of some kind.

Peter stood at the desk, leafing through its contents.

'Is this place Andrew's?' Mary asked.

Peter looked at her, his expression unreadable. He indicated

a sheaf of notes. 'Andrew's writing, all right. This is his workroom, I suppose you'd say – his laboratory, his library, the place where he did his real work.'

'But it looks as though it's been here for years. I mean *hundreds* of years.'

'He didn't build it. He inherited it from Geoffrey Carlyle, I expect, along with the house and everything. Andrew was carrying on his work.'

'What work?'

'Can't you guess?' Peter said bitterly, glancing up at her. 'Look at this –' He held up an ancient-looking book, bound in pale yellow leather. Mary took it from him. The binding was surprisingly fine and smooth, softer than ordinary leather. She flipped to the title page.

Clavicula Salomonis . . .' she read. The publisher was French, but the text proved to be in English. She skimmed the book, staring at the odd, cabbalistic diagrams and reading the chapter titles aloud:

'"*Concerning the Medals or Pentacles, and the Manner of Constructing Them*". What does that mean?' She turned pages. '"*In What Manner the Master of the Art Should Keep, Rule and Govern Himself*". Master of the Art? Oh God, listen to this: "*How to Render Thyself Master of a Treasure Possessed by the Spirits*".'

She read fragments of the incantations which comprised the text, each laden with Hebrew-sounding names and phrases. As she read, Mary's feelings were a mixture of icy disbelief, revulsion, and the certainty that here, at last, was the explanation for her unease.

She closed the book and placed it carefully back on the desk. She stared at it. 'It's a *grimoire*. A book of old magic.' As she spoke the words she felt even colder.

'*Black* magic,' Peter added. 'Andrew obviously got involved in it at Oxford. His mentor – Carlyle must have been an evil old man.'

'But it's sick . . . crazy. How could Andrew have got caught up in something like this?'

'Carlyle obviously convinced him. His chair of parapsychology must have been a front, a way of finding the kind of

people he regarded as adepts. And Andrew's talent was his weak spot. He could be cynical as hell about anything else, but he desperately wanted to believe that he had some special ability in that area. I remember something he said in the spring when I was down here – something about Carlyle's research "blasting open a doorway" . . .'

Mary picked up another book: a journal bound in red leather. It was filled with Andrew's tiny, neat, almost indecipherable handwriting. Placing it open on the desk, the two of them pored over the crabbed entries. Mostly they were concerned with 'experiments', described in obsessive detail: the gathering of ingredients under carefully defined conditions (this herb to be picked only by moonlight; that one only on the stroke of midnight; this to be cut only with a black-handled knife; that to be plucked whole from the soil with the left hand); their preparation; the purification of the magician (or magus, as Andrew always referred to him); the lengthy, repetitive, bizarre incantations. And all of this numbing ritual designed to open a channel to another world – a hidden spirit realm so unhuman and evil that simply to read about it filled Mary with desolation, as though an abyss had opened in her world-picture, at the foot of which lay chaos. Could it be that *this* – the very antithesis of the scientific realism which she had thought now described the universe – that this lay at the hidden heart of existence?

And there was more: personal material, cryptic, intriguing, frightening . . .

> 'Today brings news that Huxley has gone to his rest. Carlyle is now the last of the Nine, but it cannot be long until he follows. Yet again, he instructs me on the signs of recognition, as if he fears that when the Time of Summoning comes round I will not be ready, the Enneas will not form, and the opportunity will be lost for another thousand years! The frustration he must feel! – the most recent of a line of magi stretching back for centuries, yet obliged to depart a mere handful of years before their crowning moment, having to entrust matters to apprentices he has not fully trained.'

'Carlyle is departed. It happened quickly and quietly. Palmer used the fork to speed his passing, as the ritual requires. Now we shall see. I do not trust Palmer: I see ambition in his every move, every expression. We are supposed to work together, to prepare the way, but I foresee only conflict. A thought: perhaps this was Carlyle's purpose all along: to set us against each other, as a final, decisive test of strength and wisdom and cunning.'

'What does it all mean?' Mary said.

'Rivalries. Hatred. The usual human feelings, only magnified and distorted by their work. This man Palmer is the one who was washed up in the spring. I think Andrew was responsible for his death.'

They turned the pages, skimming long sections of magical and alchemical jottings, arriving finally at an unprecedentedly lengthy incantation illustrated with many figures and diagrams similar to those in the grimoire.

It was headed: 'To summon the succubus, and to bind her'.

'The succubus . . .' Mary whispered. The word was vaguely familiar to her, although the full meaning was elusive. But the name had an unpleasant connotation that made her shiver. 'That's a sort of demon, isn't it?'

Peter had gone very pale. He frowned and nodded. When he spoke his voice was hoarse. 'A female demon. I'm sure of it. A creature that exerts complete sexual control over men.'

'Oh my God,' Mary said quietly, her eyes wide. 'So that's what Andrew . . .'

She trailed off, not liking to finish the sentence.

'It can't be true,' Peter murmured. 'Andrew may have *believed* in all of this, but it can't be *true*.' His voice lacked conviction.

He turned the pages, skimming the many lines of incantation. Then he found a journal entry . . .

'It is here. She is here. *They* are here. The succubus. The incubus. I have done it. Carlyle would be horrified (or perhaps proud of his pupil's ability so quickly to outstrip his master?). It is overwhelming: no wonder the pleasure

is so consuming to ordinary mortals. Yet already I feel something more: the bond which I have created grows and strengthens in unexpected ways. Who would have thought such a thing possible?'

'Palmer is ended. It was done quickly, easily, by D. Afterwards he told me, with relish, how he had involved two others, who also went to their deaths. This disturbs me, weighs upon me. What is worse is his *enjoyment* of causing death: truly demonic, truly frightening. It is remarkable how dissimilar he and S. often seem. Though I must not delude myself as to her nature . . .'

For several pages the entries became brief, perfunctory, scattered, as though Andrew deSolla – previously so meticulous in his record-keeping – had become too preoccupied with other matters to give them his full attention. Then:

'I now understand the entire truth of what I have done. I am weakening. The hold is too strong: I cannot resist it. It is my own fault, of course: my research, proud as I was of it, was not quite thorough enough. What a simple precaution might have protected me. I feel like one of those overambitious mortals in Greek myth: the sin of hubris, quickly and inevitably punished by Nemesis. S. and I are both helpless: she is simply the creature of the forces I sought to control. Does she truly love me? Is such a thing possible? I believe it is; it must be in her nature. Yet though *she* wishes me no harm, *he* will destroy me. The outcome is clear. And what then? What then? S. will not reveal it to me, but I will not fear. I understood the risks when I embarked upon the path. No regrets. The end will be quicker, far quicker than I expected, and not pleasant – and the plans for the Nine are now in ruins: no time to find another (and what punishment awaits me for that?) – but no regrets. I *must* ensure, though, that my passing does not release the bond and loose D. uncontrolled on the world.'

Peter's attention was caught by a noise at the doorway. He looked up to see Samantha standing there, her eyes glowing with incandescent rage.

'What are you doing here?' she said in a low, dangerous tone. 'This is private, secret.'

She moved into the room, but stopped partway and walked off abruptly to the side. She picked up a crucible from the workbench, handled it distractedly, angrily, turned again to face them.

'Have you read this?' Peter asked, holding Andrew's journal towards her.

She made as if to reach for it, but halted. Her eyes blazed. 'No. It's Andrew's. It's private. Come away from there.' She prowled around the edge of the room, circling the desk like a predatory animal staying just beyond the heat of the camp fire. Peter observed that she stayed beyond the circles inlaid in the floor. Coincidence . . . or a barrier of some kind?

Mary looked uncertainly at him. He shook his head. 'I think we'll stay where we are for the time being – until we get some explanations.'

Samantha sighed. The light faded from her eyes and she was again an ordinary woman: beautiful, but tired, her expression sad.

'You think I'd harm you? No, Peter, I wouldn't do that . . . you must know that. If you've been reading Andrew's papers you know too much for your own good, believe me. You should go away, the pair of you, and go now. I'll be leaving soon myself, like I told you. It'll all be over. Don't get involved any further.'

There was almost a pleading note in her voice, but Peter shook his head decisively. 'It's no good, Samantha. We've already gone too far. We need to know the truth . . . no more evasions, no more lies.'

'The truth? If you've read Andrew's journal you know it already.'

'We've read them,' Mary said, 'but parts of them don't make sense, at least not to me. All this stuff about the Nine and the Summoning. And what *does* make sense seems insane. All this about you, and Daniel . . .'

'All true.'

'Are you saying that Andrew somehow *conjured up* you and Daniel?' Peter said. He knew what the answer would be, but at the same time could hardly believe the conversation was taking place.

'He summoned us. That's right. He made us come here, and he bound us here.'

'Summoned you from where? From Hell?'

'That's what your priests call it. Of course, they know nothing of what it's really like.'

'And you serve evil?' Mary said, her voice surprisingly controlled. Peter realised that while he had been amassing clues, Mary had instinctively recognised the truth, even though she hadn't been able to analyse and express it until now.

'Evil? What's that? That's a human concept. I serve my masters, as I have to. I have no choice.'

'But the killings . . . Daniel . . .'

Samantha sighed again. 'Daniel is different. That's why it's important for you and everyone here that we leave.'

'But *why* did Andrew summon you. What do you *do*?' Peter asked.

Samantha laughed, her eyes glowing. 'You ask me that? You? You know better than most what a succubus does!'

Peter felt himself blushing. He saw Mary flash him a look of anguished betrayal. 'But you work together, you and Daniel?'

'The succubus uses her power to trap men, to enslave them. The incubus – Daniel – does the same to women. It's a cycle. Eventually the people are used up, destroyed, one way or the other. As Andrew was destroyed.'

'And you don't care,' Mary whispered.

'Care? Yes, I did care for Andrew,' Samantha said softly, sadly. 'But there was nothing either of us could do. He had bound us together, and the only way to release the bond was by his death. It had to be done a certain way, so that we would be summoned back as soon as a few matters were taken care of. Andrew arranged it; he tricked Daniel.'

'Daniel doesn't want to leave,' Mary said: a statement rather than a question.

'Where *is* Daniel?' Peter asked.

Samantha looked surprised. 'You *still* haven't understood, have you?'

'Understood what?'

'About Daniel. Do you want him to come here?'

'Yes. Let's hear what he has to say.'

'Very well. This isn't easy, but it ought to be possible.'

Samantha stood upright, just outside the circle, and closed her eyes. Peter watched in puzzlement as she began to breathe deeply, as if going into a trance. As her breathing became slower and more regular, the air began to fill with a static electric charge. Peter felt his scalp tingle, and saw that stray hairs were standing out from Mary's head, as though she were touching a van der Graaff generator. The papers on the desk rustled and crackled. There was an odour of ozone, and beyond it a whiff of something bitter . . . sulphur?

Around Samantha the very air seemed to waver slightly and become cloudy, like water being stirred. Peter rubbed his eyes, but the effect remained.

And in the middle of it, Samantha . . .

Samantha began to change.

It was like watching a bizarre, speeded-up nature film, in which creatures grow with a swift, unnatural, writhing action. Samantha's body rippled and stretched, as though her flesh were plasticine and her bones putty. Her clothing hid much of the change, but Peter could see the way the soft flesh of her arms bunched into harder muscle, could see fine fair hairs waving like feelers as they sprouted, could see her jawline become squarer and firmer . . .

'This isn't happening,' said Mary, quietly, tonelessly. 'This isn't possible.'

But it continued to happen, Samantha's substance re-moulding and rearranging itself, until – after a few brief, eternal seconds – the charge in the atmosphere died away.

Daniel stood in front of them.

He was smiling, but it was a chilling expression, lips drawn ferally back from teeth. His eyes glowed with hatred and with evil. Instinctively Peter checked that the circle was still unbroken, and that Daniel was outside it.

'*One* person,' Peter murmured. 'All the time, *one* person. And we never suspected.'

'No, you never suspected,' said Daniel. 'You're so stupid, like all your kind. You go through your lives not understanding anything. You come to your deaths and you *still* don't usually understand. Why don't you come upstairs, and I'll explain?' He ushered them towards the door with a swift, commanding motion, and Peter found to his astonishment that he took two steps to follow, until Mary's voice cut in:

'We may be stupid, but we're not *that* stupid. If you want to explain, why don't you come over here to the desk and do it?'

Daniel's eyes flashed. 'You think you're safe there? You think you're protected?'

'Yes,' Peter said.

'But what makes you think I want to harm you? After all, Samantha really likes you . . .'

'Something tells me that you and Samantha don't have a lot in common,' Mary said.

Daniel laughed, long and loud. 'Not a lot in common? We share the same flesh, don't we? I'd say that was *quite* a lot in common, wouldn't you?'

He began to pace the rim of the circle restlessly, in a way that reminded Peter irresistibly of an animal eager to clutch its prey. He looked at Mary. She was pale, but seemed calm an determined.

'Samantha doesn't . . . let you out much, does she, Daniel?' Peter said at length.

Daniel stopped. '*Let* me out? You think *she* controls me? It's not like that. She does her part – the soft, easy part – then I appear and do mine. There's no *control*. We're equals.'

'Then how come she managed to summon you just now?' Mary said quickly.

'She had to make a special effort. The usual trigger wasn't there.'

Mary looked puzzled. 'The usual trigger?'

'Sex,' said Peter quickly.

Daniel smiled. 'That's right. She does her part. Then I do mine. Why don't you come upstairs, Mary, and I'll show you. I'm sure you could use the practice.'

Mary flushed, her eyes dropped.

'I think we'll just stay here till Samantha gets back,' Peter said.

Daniel's face twisted, grew ugly. 'What makes you think she'll be back in a hurry?' But, even as he spoke, the air filled again with a taste of sulphur. Daniel let out a string of oaths. Peter and Mary watched in horrified fascination as the transformation process happened again.

When it was over, Samantha stood in front of them . . . but Peter realised immediately that it was a Samantha subtly changed: in the squarer jawline, in the hint of male musculature, in the fine hairs on her arms, she still bore traces of Daniel!

Samantha looked down at herself in apparent horror. Peter could see conflicting emotions playing across her features: distress, but underlying that the malicious amusement of Daniel.

'Sathanas,' Samantha breathed. 'I should never have done that!'

'Done what?' Mary said.

'Forced the change. I should never have tried to show you. It isn't supposed to happen like that. There's a pattern, and patterns aren't to be broken.'

'What have you done?' Peter asked.

Samantha looked at him. Her features spoke of dismay, but somewhere within her eyes was a look of unholy amusement and triumph. 'I've let him out a bit. Just a little bit, but that's too much. I may not be able to control him now. I don't know what I've done . . . I must get out of here . . . leave this place. Soon!

She turned and rushed from the room.

Chapter Twelve

Michael Flynn stood at his workbench, planing a replacement door panel with slow, methodical strokes. The measured rhythm of the work filled him, as always, with a simple contentment. Curls of shaved timber sprang up, like growths, from the plane, and fell to the floor, which was covered in a scuffed layer of sawdust and shavings. The smell of fresh-cut wood filled Flynn's little workshop.

This was the part of the hotel where he felt most at home. It was Gabrielle who ran the business, and though he was happy to help his sister-in-law, he did not feel comfortable dealing with hotel guests. Especially guests as odd as that blind man, Hobson. He was some kind of religious zealot, evidently. Flynn recognised the type: he had left Belfast in part to get away from people like that. Flynn looked forward to the end of the tourist season, when he and Gabrielle would have the rambling old house to themselves. Perhaps, then, they would be able to sort their lives out . . .

Lost in his thoughts, Flynn did not hear the door open. When a familiar voice said, 'Hello, Michael,' he jumped involuntarily, the plane tearing off a ragged splinter of wood from the carefully smoothed surface. He cursed.

Samantha was standing just inside the room, dressed all in white, as usual. Immediately he saw her, Flynn felt a chill of apprehension, on top of the normal confusion of emotions she aroused in him. There was something unusual about her mocking half-smile. Something he did not like.

'So soon,' he said, half-questioningly. 'I wasn't expecting . . .'

'I had to come and see you one last time.' Samantha's voice seemed to have deepened an octave, and it carried a sardonic undertone.

'Last time? What do you mean?'

'We'll be leaving soon . . . very soon. But we have to tie up loose ends first.' With quick, fluid gestures Samantha unfastened her belt, let her trousers fall to the floor, and stepped out of them. She was naked underneath.

'We'll go upstairs,' Flynn said, thickly. He was alarmed by her sudden brazenness: their previous meetings had been at secluded, prearranged rendezvous, or occasionally in his bedroom. Not here, in a room where Gabrielle might wander in at any time. But the sight of Samantha's pale legs and dark bush of pubic hair excited him as instantly and powerfully as ever.

'No,' she said, approaching him. 'We'll do it here. Now.' She put her hands on his shoulders and propelled him firmly, unceremoniously, to the ground. Flynn felt her supple strength as never before. He lay on his back among the wood shavings as she unfastened his trousers and drew out his hard penis, handling it brusquely, without any of the expert tenderness he had come to expect. Her face was expressionless, and she did not look at him.

Quickly she straddled him and pushed herself on to him. Flynn exclaimed with surprise and pain, for although there was the heat he had come to expect, she was not at all moist: it was as though he was entering a dry, rubbery tube which rasped and pulled at his tender skin. When penetration was complete she settled on to him, not moving externally. Inside, her muscles gripped and kneaded him with extraordinary proficiency and strength, like a pair of hands unemotionally milking him of his semen.

Flynn pawed ineffectually at Samantha's legs. They were covered in unfamiliar, fine hairs. Hard muscles lay under the smooth skin. When he looked up, he saw that her lips were drawn back from her teeth in a kind of snarl; beads of sweat stood out on her pale forehead.

In a few moments she had drawn him *forced* him to a shuddering, draining, painful climax that made him cry out loud. He closed his eyes, gasping for breath, his mind awhirl. He could hear the rapid beating of his heart. He felt her shifting slightly atop him, though he was still gripped in a tight internal embrace.

'Michael – ' she said, her voice soft and low.

He looked up. Samantha's face loomed closely above his. At first it would not come into focus: he could see only a white oval, framed in a cloud of hair. Then the image resolved. Initially he could not make sense of it: it was both familiar and strange, and his exhausted mind could not separate the two elements.

'That's the end of it,' she said, her lips twisting in a malicious smile.

At last he saw clearly, and his mind plunged into an abyss of incomprehension and terror. The face hovering above his was not Samantha's – it belonged, instead, to her brother, Daniel! The hair was shorter, the planes of the face tauter and more muscular. Yet the body in whose embrace he was still locked was that of a woman . . .

Daniel/Samantha looked down at him. Seeing his confusion and fright, the smile broadened into a mirthless and sadistic laugh.

'What –? Who –?' he said.

'Too late to worry about that,' said the thing astride him. 'Time to go.'

It raised its arm, and Flynn saw that it was holding a hand cleaver from his workbench. He hardly had time to cry out before the creature's hand flashed down. He felt an explosion of light and pain as the weapon sliced through his skull and was embedded deep in his brain.

Gabrielle Danton was tidying one of the guest rooms when she heard footsteps on the stairs. Glancing automatically through the half-open door she saw Daniel's head appear above the level of the floor. He was approaching slowly, almost cautiously. He hesitated when he saw her. His eyes glowed in that intense, almost frightening way she had grown used to. But there was something else about him, this time . . . he looked dishevelled and wild. His skin reflected light, as if he was sweating. He was breathing in a more laboured way.

In pain, Gabrielle thought. As if he is in pain . . .

But Gabrielle Danton was more disturbed by the very fact of Daniel's arrival. It was too soon. Much too soon. The sight of

him made her feel sick with apprehension, with anticipated pain. She began to shake slightly, and she clutched the pillow of the guest's bed to her stomach.

She had come to expect a pattern to Daniel's visits . . . one visit every two or three weeks. But it was a matter of a few days since the last time he had been here. Instinctively she stroked her hip, where the tingle of half-healed scratches reminded her vividly of the way his nails always raked her flesh in the extremity of his passion. She felt, as usual, a mixture of uncontrollable desire for this beautiful young man and fascinated horror at his violent, almost sadistic lovemaking.

As Daniel reached the top of the stairs, Gabrielle stepped out onto the landing to meet him. There was something wrong, something badly wrong. She kept the pillow pressed to her body, slight protection against the taut, tense man who had come to visit her. She noticed that there were patches of sawdust clinging to Daniel's normally immaculate trousers. His shirt front was wet, and speckled with brown spots, some mark that he'd tried to remove with water.

'You can't want me now, not so soon,' she whispered.

'Now,' he murmured. His voice was hoarse. He fixed her with that terrifying stare of his, and she felt her legs go weak. Then he smiled, disarmingly, yet without humour.

'But it isn't safe,' Gabrielle insisted. 'Flynn's only downstairs. He might come up at any time.'

Daniel shook his head. 'Flynn's gone out. I saw him. I think he has a slight headache . . .'

He began to walk towards her and she knew she would have to surrender. Her heart raced, her mind spun, her whole body anticipated his love making, and she knew she would have to surrender.

She let the pillow drop. She reached shaking fingers to the belt of her jeans, and turned to step back into the bedroom.

Along the corridor the door of another guest room opened. Guiltily, Gabrielletightened her belt again and stopped, glancing to see who was emerging into the hotel.

It was the old blind man, Hobson. He stepped onto the landing and straightened up, as if looking at the two lovers. Beside him, his companion, the cocky little girl, stood smiling.

Hobson was wearing the same dark suit, but had removed his shirt. His skin was sunburned. He appeared to be tattooed.

Tall, and in his own way menacing, Hobson took three steps along the landing towards Gabrielle and Daniel.

Daniel caught his breath. He reached out and took hold of the large wooden carving at the top of the bannister. He seemed to lean against it, as if suddenly weak. Gabrielle glanced at him and noticed how worried he looked. For the first time since she had known him, he looked uncertain and apprehensive.

Because of a blind man and a little girl? It made no sense. But before she could speak, before she could interrupt the strange silence, Hobson had made a sound as of someone recognising an old friend . . . or an old enemy.

'You . . .' he said, his voice a whisper. He stepped closer. The dark glass of his spectacles gleamed with the light from the bedroom window. He was staring straight at the younger man, and Daniel was now more alert, and looking very cold.

'Don't interfere, old man,' Daniel said, but Hobson just laughed.

'When you speak you give yourself away,' he said. 'Now I know you. Now I hear it. At *last.*'

Both men faced each other, but they were motionless; now, tense and strained. The little girl whispered, quite audibly, 'Kill it now. Kill it *now* while you have the chance.'

'Silence,' Hobson said.

Watching from the bedroom doorway, Gabrielle was horrified by what she was hearing. *Kill* him? *Kill* Daniel? What was this crazy old man talking about. She stared at Daniel. She had never seen him so frightened, even though he was forcing his even, arrogant smile. But his skin was so pale, now. He seemed trapped by the old man's blind stare, a rabbit, fixed by the hypnotic gaze of a snake. And Hobson seemed equally trapped. The two men were just four paces apart, but each twitched and swayed in mimicry of the other. The tension between them was almost tangible, the air rippling and crackling.

Kill him. Kill Daniel now. While you have the chance. Hateful words uttered by a hateful little girl, who cowered

behind her guardian, and smiled evilly as she watched the young man before her.

Kill him now . . .

'You have no power over me,' Daniel said softly, but his voice wavered slightly, almost inaudibly, enough to let Gabrielle know that he was frightened. Hobson shook his head very slowly.

'Oh, but you're wrong, monster . . .'

Monster? What was he saying? What was going *on?*

'I have more control over you than you realise . . .'

Daniel's breath hissed from between his lips as he said, 'I'll kill you like I'd kill a fly on the wall. You *know* you have no power . . .'

'How easily I shall destroy you,' Hobson said, 'How easily I shall squeeze the darkness from your flesh . . . when the time comes.' He took a step forward, and Daniel straightened up, leaned back, seemed to be bending away from the old man. 'No power?' Hobson murmured, and his face leered from behind the dark masks of his eyes. 'No *power* . . .?'

And as he spoke so he reached into his jacket pocket and drew out a short stick, carved from some pale wood. The stick was shaped – a long, lean figure, small arms crossed on its chest, eyes abnormally large and staring. It was an ugly thing, a hideous thing, something that bespoke ancient evil, ancient times . . .

Hobson held the totem towards Daniel. He said, 'Elohim! Adonai!'

And as he spoke each word Daniel jerked backwards, as if he had been violently struck. Gabrielle even thought she *heard* the sound of the blows.

'No!' Daniel shouted. Hobson stepped again towards him, shaking the strangely profane talisman . . . and Daniel was pushed backwards by the same invisible blows.

Hobson smiled, triumphant, murderous.

But Daniel caught his breath, rubbed his chest, and quickly walked back to the head of the stairs. He glanced at Gabrielle, then back at Hobson. 'If you know what I am,' he murmured, 'then you know how easily I can destroy you.'

Hobson's voice was full of menace as he spoke softly back.

'You have it wrong, monster. I have sought you for many years. I have waited many years for this meeting. The next time we meet will be the last time you breathe in earthly form.'

Daniel laughed. 'You have a few tricks, a few simple defences; and you have your obsession. And they are not enough, old man. They are not enough, and they *will* not be enough. You are blind and you are weak. And the child . . .' He glanced at Karianna. 'The child is tearing you apart and you can't see it.'

'Kill it *now*,' Karianna whispered, her eyes widening with alarm as Daniel's gaze fixed her and frightened her.

'Soon . . .' Hobson said.

'I'll be waiting for you,' Daniel murmured; then, with a last glance at Gabrielle, he ran swiftly down the stairs, taking them two at a time. Gabrielle heard the front door of the hotel bang violently open and shut. She went back into the bedroom and watched from the window as Daniel ran swiftly along the road and disappeared from sight.

When she turned back, Hobson was standing in the doorway, smiling at her.

Daniel raged through the streets of Penthor, consumed by a fury and an agony beyond ordinary human understanding. The source of the pain was Michael Flynn's semen, stored in his body from its succubus phase and now due – past due – to be transferred to the woman victim of the incubus.

Thwarted in his attempt to go as he usually did to Gabrielle Danton, Daniel now found the alien substance curdling and burning within his human form. He *had* to get rid of it. And soon.

That meant he had to find a receptacle. A woman.

Any woman.

As he walked he encountered an elderly couple on an easy afternoon stroll through the town's back lanes. The impulse to grab the old woman there and then was almost overpowering, but the rational, scheming part of him realised that the man might get away, and it might create trouble for which he was not yet fully prepared.

With a cry that expressed both his frustration and his rage he

pushed his way between them, taking pleasure in their expressions of shock and fright. The old man fell heavily onto the road. His wife knelt in concern at his side, looking up towards Daniel's departing back and calling out her own anger.

Down the street, round the corner, into another avenue . . . and he found what he was seeking. A middle-aged woman in her garden, hanging up her washing. She was a plump, nondescript person in a faded floral dress, her hair tinted auburn. To Daniel she was no more or less than any other mortal human: a receptacle, which he regarded with disdain and contempt.

She did not hear him open the gate, let himself into the garden and walk silently up to her. Her first awareness of him was when he grabbed her with irresistible strength, one hand covering her mouth, the other clutching her waist. The clothes pegs she was holding were scattered everywhere, and in her struggles she kicked over the basket of washing.

Daniel dragged the woman to the side of her house, where a privet hedge hid them from the road. He forced her to her knees, then down to the ground. As she turned her head, trying to stop him forcing her face into the soil, he could see her eyes bulging with terror.

He shifted his grip to her neck and pressed her face into the ground, then released his grip round her waist and, as her arms thrashed feebly, tore away her dress and underclothes. He forced his way into her and ejaculated instantly, then held her down with both hands as her struggles grew weaker and her face turned cyan blue.

When she was dead he pushed her body aside. Standing up, he calmly rearranged his clothing and walked back towards Sele House.

'I have spent my life searching for this evil,' said William Hobson. 'I knew I would find it again. One day . . .'

Gabrielle Danton sat uneasily in her armchair as the old blind man paced around her small sitting room. The way he never seemed to bump into things was almost uncanny, as if he wasn't really blind at all. She wished he would go away: part of her mind was worrying about Michael – where was he? – and

the rest was preoccupied with Daniel. Instead, though, she was forced to sit and listen to a man who was plainly an eccentric . . . if not a fully-fledged lunatic!

His grand-daughter had run off somewhere, seemingly relieved to be rid of him for a while.

'It's the eyes,' Hobson was saying. 'You can always tell them by the eyes.'

'What do you mean?'

'Don't tell me you didn't notice. Your *friend.* What colour were his eyes? No. Don't tell me. I'll tell you. They were a colour you've never seen before. A deep blue, almost purple.'

Gabrielle was surprised, and before it occurred to her that his grand-daughter could have told him, she had said, 'How could you possibly know that?'

'It is the mark of evil. Have you ever seen such eyes anywhere else?'

'No . . .' Gabrielle said quietly. 'Well, yes. His sister has the same colouring . . .'

Hobson smiled: a thin, mirthless expression. 'Of course. His *sister.*' There were incomprehensibly meaningful overtones to his voice. 'She would bear the mark as well. As would the offspring of any union with either of them.'

'How do you know all this?'

Hobson halted in front of her, and slowly removed his dark glasses. Behind them, two empty sockets stared at her, more horrible by far than the blind white eyes she had been expecting. Gabrielle felt nauseated, yet unable to avert her own gaze from his ruined features.

In a voice that, though gentle, was filled with menace, Hobson said, 'How do I know? I know because *I* carried the mark. I know because I had to destroy that mark before the evil could contaminate me.'

'You did . . . *that*?' Gabrielle was stunned. 'You *blinded* yourself?'

'It was the only way.'

Gabrielle began to feel deeply alarmed. It was one thing to rant on about your weird beliefs: another matter entirely to mutilate yourself in pursuit of them.

'Most of the people the evil touches, it destroys,' Hobson

said, his voice even quieter now, almost reflective. He resumed his pacing. 'I was one of the rare ones. Most of the time the offspring is not . . . viable. Lucy Trevithick's child would not have been, though of course she was unaware of the fact. Her death was unnecessary.'

'What do you know about Lucy? What do you know about her death?'

'I know the truth. She was with child. She realised what kind of *thing* it was she carried: she ended both herself and *it*.'

Angrily, Gabrielle snapped, 'I'm sorry Mr Hobson. I've listened to enough of this. You're entitled to your beliefs, but I'm afraid I'm not really interested in superstition –'

As she spoke she began to rise to her feet, but Hobson took two swift, assured paces across the room and pushed her back into her chair.

'You will stay and you will listen,' he said. 'This is no superstition. I have not spent my life rooting out *superstition!* I have spent it in search of the evil that destroyed my parents and maimed me. I found it in Karianna's parents, and I've found it here.'

'Karianna's parents? You mean you aren't related?'

He straightened up, his skull-like face still turned down towards her. 'No. I became her guardian after I had freed her parents from the evil.'

'Freed them . . ' Gabrielle felt a chill as the implications of his words sank in. 'You mean you *killed* them.'

'I *freed* them. Once in the hands of the evil there was no escape for them. That which the evil touches, dies. With some it is slow and painful; with others, I can make it a speedy release.' His voice was a low, almost loving croon.

Gabrielle looked around her desperately. He *was* a madman. She had to get out. Surely she could outmanoeuvre a blind man. On the small table next to her stood a heavy china vase. Quietly she reached for it, lifting it very carefully so that it did not scrape against the tabletop.

'You must have realised by now that you are carrying a child.' Hobson said, suddenly.

Gabrielle was taken aback. She had only just confirmed her pregnancy, and had so far confided in no one, not even Michael (and certainly not Daniel).

'You don't deny it,' Hobson went on. 'You can't deny it. But you must have felt the pain, must know that it is no ordinary pregancy.'

Again, she was surprised by his knowledge. Her sickness and cramps had been appalling, worse than any of the books had led her to believe, but she had assumed that that was just her ill-fortune. Could it be that the old man really knew what he was talking about? No, that was insane. He was guessing: that was all.

Gently she edged her way out of the chair, the springs creaking ever so slightly but not enough – she hoped - to indicate any more than a shift in her position.

Standing up, she began to move towards the door, vase held overhead, ready to shatter on Hobson's skull if he tried to stop her. He was still talking and pacing, speaking quietly and earnestly of his duty.

Gabrielle reached the door, groped behind her for the knob. Then Hobson turned and seemed to look straight at her. All at once there was a knife in his hand: a strange knife, she noted, with a carved white handle and strange symbols engraved on the blade.

As she desperately opened the door he strode towards her. She swung the vase at him, but as she did so she felt a gentle touch – little more than a nudge – between her ribs. Her blow went awry. The vase shattered ineffectually on his shoulder. Looking down she saw, with incomprehension, the hilt of the knife against her blouse, and a spreading flower of crimson around it. There was a singing in her ears and the room was suddenly very large and grey and distant. It spun, and she found that the carpet had somehow come up and hit her in the cheek. There was pain, now, a deep, thudding pain that eliminated all her other senses, except that she could hear, as the world receded and went black, Hobson reciting a Latin prayer.

Chapter Thirteen

They remained in the circle, in Andrew deSolla's secret study, for several hours after the demon had fled. Mary wept a little, then grew very quiet, very concerned. She sat on the floor, legs crossed, arms folded over her chest as she hugged herself and watched the door through which Samantha had departed.

Peter, too, seemed shaken by what they'd witnessed. He was as white as a sheet, and when he talked his voice trembled, and when he touched Mary reassuringly his fingers were quivering.

After a while he came and sat down beside her.

'Now what do we do?' she whispered. He reached his arm round her and drew her closer, and she rested her head on his shoulder and closed eyes.

'I don't know,' he said.

'We've got to leave. We can't stay here, not now that we know.' She sat up straight, wiped tears from her eyes and searched Peter for some sign of agreement. Peter's face was grim; he looked thoughtful, then after a moment almost resigned.

He scratched his cheek and looked around. 'You're right,' he said. 'We can't stay here under these circumstances.'

'Let's leave now.'

He glanced at her. 'And leave behind . . . *that?*' He looked at the door. Mary shuddered.

'What do you propose, then? You're no wizard What else can we do?'

'Kill it,' he said. 'Banish it. Somewhere in Andrew's journals there must be a banishing spell. It's just a question of finding it.'

'You're not Andrew,' Mary said. 'You don't have his power.'

'We won't know until I try,' Peter murmured. He squeezed Mary again, and this time held the grip more emphatically. 'I think I can do it. It's only a matter of words, incantations. I used some when I closed off this circle of Andrew's. And it worked, didn't it?'

'Yes . . .'

'So, then. Trust me. Andrew will have shown me the way, somewhere in the grimoire.'

They stood up and rather unsteadily made their way upstairs, treading cautiously, checking round corners. That moment's violence from the Daniel-form of the creature had concerned them both; but Samantha was their friend, and would not harm them. They were sure of that.

Once at Mary's room, Peter created a circle around the bed. Mary closed the curtains against the gathering dusk. When the circle was complete, according to the instructions in Andrew's grimoire, they both stepped inside it and sat down.

'Will you be all right?' Peter asked, and Mary smiled.

'I'm sure I will. And we're really leaving tomorrow?'

'Of course. I'll destroy the lab and all its contents. I'll block all chance of anyone ever doing what Andrew did.'

Mary took his hand and raised it to her lips. Peter watched her, disturbed and strangely - unwelcomely – aroused.

'It's so nice to be with you, Peter,' she whispered. He felt very shy, suddenly, and reached out to hug her more fully. He kissed the top of her head and she patted his back.

'We mustn't be such strangers in future,' he said.

She squeezed him. 'I've missed you very much. Maybe . . . maybe when we get back to London . . .'

She drew away from him, stared at him closely.

He frowned. 'Maybe what?'

'Maybe we should talk about things.'

'Us, you mean?'

She held his gaze, looking quite uncertain, but then nodded. 'I had a fling with Andrew, you know . . .'

'I suspected as much,' Peter confessed.

Mary looked slightly shame faced. 'But I never really wanted to. I always liked you the best. But you were so remote, and so untouchable.'

'That's how I always thought of Andrew.'

'To you he may have been. But he made it easy for me to . . . to be with him. I think I did it out of spite. You were my cousin. We lived in the same house. It was forbidden for me to think of you as anything other than a brother. But I felt more strongly than that. I think you did too.'

'Such frankness,' Peter said, and laughed. He felt slightly uncomfortable with this sudden heart-baring, even though he knew that what was being voiced was only the truth.

The truth as Samantha had seen it, and as she had stated it, and as Peter had come to accept it, as he had lain in bed next to the demon's cool, nude shape . . .

It was Mary that he really wanted. It was Mary . . .

'Lock the door,' he said suddenly. 'And don't move from the bed until the morning. By then it should be resolved, one way or the other.'

Mary didn't ask him what he meant by that. If she was aware of his hesitant, slightly worried look, it didn't register.

'Goodnight,' she said.

'See you in the morning . . .'

Peter sat at Andrew's desk, surrounded by his journals and papers. The desk lamp cast a pool of yellow light across the centre of the room; the shadows, beyond the protective circle, were dim and gloomy. Peter had gathered together everything that looked to have special occult significance: all the books, the robes, the ceremonial instruments and, above all, the notes. The stuff was piled on the floor around the desk. He would burn it piece by piece, he decided: slowly and carefully, so as not to risk starting a fire that might destroy the house.

As Peter sifted through the papers, he tried to visualize Andrew deSolla sitting here, in this secret room, planning his ever more ambitious forays into a world that few believed to exist, a world that part of Peter's mind, even now, rebelled against accepting. He could imagine Andrew's restless ambition and thirst for knowledge leading him onward, until the point where he overreached himself and brought about his own doom. Yet even in doing so, he had found a kind of happiness, with Samantha.

He picked up Andrew's last journal, and flipped through it until he reached those poignant final entries. *'What a simple precaution might have protected me . . S. and I are both helpless: she is simply the creature of the forces I sought to control.'*

A simple precaution . . .

What could that be?

Peter was suddenly certain of the answer. He remembered that bizarre last visit, when he had become so drunk and ill. The details were hazy, but he recalled his prematurely aged friend looming unsteadily over him. *I must protect you, Peter,* he had said, *and I know the real way of doing it.*

Then his mind jumped forward, to that moment a couple of afternoons ago, down on the beach: Samantha finding the scar Andrew had inflicted, looking momentarily angry, then laughing with unfettered relief.

It was obvious what Andrew had done: he had given to Peter the protection he had failed to give himself.

Why would he do that, when he had been so insistent that Peter should not come back to Penthor? He turned the remaining pages of the journal. It did not take him long to find what he was looking for:

> 'I have done my best for Peter. Perhaps he will not return, but I doubt it. I could see that S. was exerting a pull on him, even though he himself was unaware of it (as perhaps was she?). He may resist coming back, but I suspect that he will find reasons to come. And then S. will fix on him, as the person closest to me. But now he will come to no harm: and, just as important – perhaps more important – whatever he does with her will not release D., if my understanding of it is right. And then, soon, they will be gone, without causing more destruction.'

And soon they will be gone . . .

It seemed that Andrew had somehow arranged things so that his death would trigger the return of Samantha and Daniel to whatever place they had come from. Hints in the journals suggested that he was fearful of what Daniel might do. Peter

could understand why, having seen the malevolence that surrounded Daniel like an almost palpable aura. Hard to believe that he and Samantha were the same entity; perhaps it was best to believe that they weren't, that they were two beings who took it in turns to inhabit their malleable body. Not that Samantha wasn't dangerous herself – she had surely killed Trevithick – but that, he sensed, was part of her essence over which she had no control. Daniel, on the other hand, seemed to enjoy and revel in destruction and pain.

But if Samantha were with someone who was protected, like Peter, then it seemed that the evil Daniel was not unleashed . . .

And soon they will be gone . . .

The memory of sex with Samantha was almost unbearably vivid. He would never find anything like that again. And it had been such a short time. In a few months – perhaps even a few weeks – it would become familiar enough, but for the moment the prospect of her leaving filled him with an awful emptiness.

Peter began to leaf through Andrew's journals more purposefully. It did not take long to find again the part he was looking for. He studied it carefully for many long minutes.

He thought of Samantha again. She seemed almost anxious to be gone. Why was that? Surely, because she was worried about Daniel. But if Andrew had arranged things properly, the destructive Daniel would never have been unloosed. Andrew had been careless, but he had recognized and recorded his error.

Peter sat, contemplating, for a long time.

Eventually he cleared a space on the table, took a sheet of clean parchment, dipped one of Andrew's pens into the inkwell, and began, laboriously, to transcribe symbols.

I am not ready, but I must *see the place. I must visit the resting place of the demon. I must go to the house . . .*

Karianna led the way. She was dressed in a warm coat. The night was chill. She carried a torch and flashed it on and off every so often, casting its beam against the silent houses of the harbourside and then, when they came along the cliff path, over the sombre, silent trees.

The night was starlit and there was a bright quarter moon. Karianna could see well enough without the torch to lead her blind guardian along the roadway. She counted out the steps – two paces to the yard, and their destination was a thousand yards along the road.

William Hobson listened to the girl's breathing. Sometimes Karianna sang. Sometimes she grumbled. He listened to her footfall, following it precisely. He took one step to her two, and repeatedly urged her 'Faster, girl. What can you see?'

'Just trees. No house . . .'

But as they walked, so his sense of unease grew stronger. It was the demon, he knew. They were approaching the nest, and the demon's defences were already reaching out to prickle his hair and tickle his skin, warning him away. With luck, the discomfort would be the result of fixed psychic barriers, and not of the conscious attention of the demon itself. Hobson knew how to penetrate the first, weak lines of any psychic defence.

'Take this . . .' he said to Karianna, and felt her small, cold hand take the symbol-inscribed scarf from his grip. She knew what to do. She wrapped the scarf around her neck, letting the eye symbol that was the *eye of Raphael* peer forward. Her pockets already jangled with the iron discs that would defend against more primitive spirit-forms.

'When we enter the gate, remember to make the sign of the pentagram,' Hobson said, and Karianna sighed with irritation.

'I *know*. I've done it before, remember?'

'Don't neglect a single detail, girl. This is the most powerful . . . and the most dangerous encounter yet . . . I sense *great* danger . . .'

'*Trust* me,' Karianna said sharply. Her words were bitingly cold, spoken with an anger that Hobson had never really noticed before.

The girl is tearing you apart . . .

The demon's taunting words were restless, irritating echoes in his mind. What had the incubus detected? That the girl was maturing? That she was growing? That she was confused, now? Perhaps he *was* feeling anxious that Karianna was rapidly developing into a self-assured and independent little creature.

She would soon want to *progress*, to *learn*. She would become frustrated otherwise.

Hobson smiled to himself. He had already decided that after this encounter with evil was finished, he would begin the next phase of Karianna's apprenticeship. The relationship between them would become so much easier, then.

The voice of evil began to whisper in his mind, a sinister sound speaking foul words, foul threats. The laughter was unhuman, the voice urgent, and deadly. In his mind's eye he saw shapes, frail, ghostly forms, hovering in the bare limbs of trees, waiting for him to pass. They mocked him, they stabbed at him, they seemed to delight in the anticipation of his spiritual dismemberment.

Hobson ignored them, drove them back with an inner scream of anger and defiance that was more effective than any contrived magic ritual. He had often encountered such passive, if sinister, defences. They held no real fear for him.

And yet . . . and yet he *was* frightened. There was an aura encompassing him, a steadily building smell, a *feel* of great power . . . a supernatural presence, in fact, that touched *all* the senses. It made his stomach feel empty, and made his heart race. And cold sweat stood out on his face, tickled his skin inside his shirt.

'It is very close,' he whispered to Karianna, and the girl replied:

'Closer than you think. We're here.'

She had stopped. Hobson reached out a hand and felt the cold brick gatepost. There was a name inscribed on the post and his finger traced the outline of the letters. Sele House.

He could sense the narrow opening of the gate itself, and the great clutter of woodland beyond. He reached out and his hand brushed against a tangle of leaves and branches that had almost obscured the entranceway from casual view.

'Can you see the house from here?' he asked the girl.

'No. Only trees. There's a driveway, though.'

'Stay close, child. Lead me through . . .'

The cold night air blew against their faces as they walked carefully along the gravel drive. Hobson sensed the trees enfolding them, bending close, but his heightened perceptions

found it difficult to draw a picture of natural growth. Human constructions, with their flat planes and sharp angles, were much easier to work out. Here in the open he felt very vulnerable, and his apprehension mounted. Karianna clung to his arm, silent now, deeply affected by the brooding silence of the place.

After they had walked for some minutes, he sensed a large space opening before them. 'Are we there?' he said softly.

Karianna hesitated for a moment, staring hard through the darkness at the tall house before them. 'We're at the edge of the woods. There's a large garden, lawns and borders, and a parking area at the side of the house.'

'Are there any lights?'

'None that I can see . . .'

Hobson called softly into the night, his voice an eerie ululation that rapidly spanned several octaves. He listened to the echoes, sensed the shape of the house, with its high gables, and tall, thin chimneys. He could tell where there were windows, where doors. The picture in his mind was of a sinister and unwelcoming abode, cold and dead . . .

He began to walk forward, feeling the bulk of the house in front of him. But, as he did so, the smell in the air that had, until now, been no more than a sour taint in his nostrils suddenly swelled to a stench that made him gag, a foul, fetid odour, the stink of decomposition.

He stopped and shook slightly, desperate to control his body. It was even more powerful than the time before, when he had last faced such evil. And as Karianna's tiny hand touched his, trying to steady him, he remembered vividly that other cold night, when he had approached a house, a small house in Hampshire, when the smell of evil had forced him back for a while, when he had battled for the life of a child . . .

Did she know? Did she suspect? Could he ever tell her?

She had been so small, a tiny, wailing child, unconscious, unaware, too small to talk, too tiny to have let the evil in.

How she had screamed in her cot. The mother had run to the child's room. She had begged him to leave the child, to spare its life. He had approached her. He remembered how her face had

glistened with tears. Her body, naked, was shaking and sweaty from the bed. He could even sense the splashes of her husband's blood. When she had reached defensively towards him she had seemed to be inviting him to her body, reaching for the embrace that would have united their flesh. He had snatched the child from its cot, holding it by one leg, bringing the iron knife to its throat for the sacrifice. But at the last minute he had felt the golden glow of innocence in the child, and instead he had slashed the knife across the mother's neck, and then again, a blind man in the darkness, seeing everything he needed to see, cutting until the head fell away from the body, which remained pressed against the high walled cot, held there by the hands that gripped the wooden bars.

The child, now, was his. And he realized that perhaps this moment had always been meant to happen. For every magus, an apprentice. The girl child was his, now, and he wrapped her in bedclothes, and soothed her, and left that terrible place, passing close to the flames that slowly consumed the demon's body. It had been in its female form, drawing blood and pain from the man it was raping, while the man's wife lay and waited, for a later hour, for the change, for the moment of her own evil ecstasy.

It burned now. And as he fled into the night he could feel the flames springing through the house, cracking glass and brick, destroying everything that had occurred there . . .

'The house is protected against me,' Hobson breathed. Karianna had walked a few paces ahead of him. She stopped and turned.

'Not against me . . .'

'You don't threaten it,' Hobson said. 'Come back. Come back to me, child.'

He stood on the lawn, sensing everything that was stopping him moving forward, from the smell to the pressure on his body. It was as if he had walked into a soft, invisible barrier. It pressed against him like a great cushion. It was a gentle pressure, except at the points where he was carrying some of the knives and instruments of his vocation inside his coat. Here the repulsive force was strong enough to make them dig quite painfully into his flesh.

'Are you all right?'

Hobson smiled at Karianna's concern. 'Yes. I'm quite all right. The flaw in any defensive system is that it can be felt, or witnessed, and thus I know exactly how to penetrate the barrier. I know what I need, now, what seals, what signs, what words.' He looked down to where the girl was standing and rested a hand on her shoulder. 'A night of preparation. That is all. This demon is strong. But I am stronger . . .'

As they stood at the edge of the lawn there was a movement, quite distantly, away to the right. Both of them glanced in that direction, and from the sound of the disturbance in the undergrowth Hobson could tell that someone was approaching.

'Swiftly, child. A hiding place . . .'

'This way!'

Hobson allowed himself to be led, the girl tugging at his sleeve, until she stopped behind a wall. Hobson leaned against the cool brickwork. 'Who is it? Describe them to me.'

'It's a woman,' Karianna whispered. 'Dressed in white, like that man at the hotel.'

The female counterpart, then, Hobson thought.

'She looks really tired,' Karianna added.

The thing must have completed its foul day's business. Now it would rest awhile.

There was no more to be done here for the moment. Hobson knew, now, who he was looking for, and where to find it. There was time to make some final preparations, then to rest and fast, before returning here, ready and refreshed. It would be difficult to penetrate the creature's den, but he would be prepared to catch it when it was outside the zone of protection.

And then . . .

William Hobson's empty eye sockets tingled, as if in anticipation of what was to come.

Peter Conway slept through most of the morning, having left Andrew's workroom in the cellar just as dawn was beginning to break through the eastern darkness.

He dressed quickly, then, looked briefly into Samantha's room: she lay in a deep, almost comatose sleep. She must have come home late and gone to bed exhausted. Peter did not care

to think about what had worn her out; but it was a relief that she had not looked for him when she had come in.

Downstairs he found Mary in the kitchen, a half-full mug of coffee on the table in front of her. She looked tired and frightened, but looked up at him, as he entered, with an expression of desperate expectancy. 'Have you done it?'

'I've done it,' he said. 'It took all night.' He tried not to look at her, fussed at the cupboards, searching for something for breakfast.

Mary said, 'So can we leave today? Peter . . .?'

'As soon as we're packed,' he lied, his mind racing. Somehow, last night, he had not considered what to do about Mary. He would have to invent some very convincing pretext for putting her on the train and staying put in Penthor himself. He would not tell her that he was staying at Sele House, of course. That would be too obvious. But he would have to contrive a reason for the fact that he was going to stay on in town somewhere.

Meanwhile, he decided, the best thing to do was to pretend that everything was as they had agreed, and wait for the moment when an excuse would present itself.

'I *am* all packed,' Mary said. Peter came over to the table and sat down, a bowl of very stale bran in his hand.

'I haven't even started.'

'*And* I've rung the station. There's a train at two thirty. I've ordered a taxi for one forty-five.'

Peter smiled. 'Great. You seem to have taken care of everything.' He spooned dry bran into his mouth, then glanced at his cousin quizzically. 'Make me some coffee?'

Mary rolled her eyes as she smiled. 'I wait on you hand and foot . . .'

But she stood and went to the stove, turning on the gas so that the kettle would heat through again.

From upstairs there came a strange, almost unearthly wailing sound. It echoed around the house then slowly died away. Mary nearly dropped the kettle, and turned anxiously to Peter.

'What in God's name –?' she said.

'Samantha,' Peter murmured.

'She sounded in terrible pain – we should do something . . .'

To Mary's clear astonishment, Peter remained where he was, chewing slowly on the dry cereal. Again the eerie wailing sounded, and this time it rose to a shriek of pure terror.

'Peter!' Mary shouted, and this time Peter reacted, jumping to his feet and running through to the stairs. At the bottom of the stairs he hesitated, then took the steps two at a time and pushed through into Samantha's bedroom. Mary followed him, but as she arrived at the room Peter turned quickly, motioned her back, and closed the door.

Samantha was sitting up in bed, the sheet fallen away from her body. Her hands were outstreched, and her violet eyes were wild and panic-stricken as she looked about her. She seemed to be feeling the air. Then she touched her breasts, running her fingers lightly over the pale flesh. She frowned, then her face twisted into a mask of bitter sadness, and she opened her mouth and again emitted the unhuman shriek.

Peter watched the scene, leaning against the bedroom door, his hands behind him. He was biting his lower lip, wondering what would happen, when she would realize the truth . . .

The cry subsided again. She scratched frantically at her face, then at her breasts, shaking her head and murmuring words.

Then, quite suddenly, she seemed to become aware that here was someone else in the room with her.

She turned her head, and her purple gaze fixed upon Peter. 'What have you *done?*' she said, her voice a hoarse whisper. 'What have you done, you fool? You silly, meddling fool . . .'

'What makes you think I've done anything?' Peter replied quietly, watching her carefully and trying to sound innocent.

'You've been meddling with Andrew's work. You've . . .'

Her words trailed off into a shocked whisper and she stared at her hands again. Peter could see the red weal marks on the wrists.

And Samantha, her voice a rising wail and more, said, 'You've *bound* me . . .! In the Name of Darkness, the fool has *bound me again!*'

When she was once more silent, sitting in bed and staring at him with a mixture of horror and terrible anger, Peter said softly, 'I'm sorry, Samantha. I couldn't bear to have you leave yet.'

Even as he spoke the words, Mary's earlier warning was a mocking, haunting whisper in his mind. But somehow . . . somehow it no longer mattered. Samantha mattered - her body, her sex, the effect she had upon him. Mary had been right and she had been wrong; yes, he needed Samantha still, but he wasn't *trapped* by her. He could break the spell whenever he chose . . .

'You blind fool,' Samantha murmured. 'Do you know what you've done?'

'I think so,' Peter said evenly. 'I did what Andrew intended to do, except that he made a fatal mistake.'

She shook her head. Her hands were by her sides, now, and a damp sheen of sweat had covered every visible inch of her pale, beautiful body. 'You don't understand, Peter. I *have* to leave Soon. Now. You *have* to undo the binding spell . . .'

'Sorry, Samantha,' Peter said, with an unconscious smile of triumph. He gave the merest shrug of his shoulders. 'It's just for a little while. Just a few weeks. I've never ever known a woman as . . . as powerful as you. Once you're gone; you're gone for good, but I need to take a lot more memories away with *me*, when *I* go. I love you. Samantha. I love Mary too. But I *need* you, for a while . . .'

As he spoke he stepped towards her, and slowly paced around the bed, feeling his strength, his power, his control. Samantha watched him, velvet eyes shimmering with incandescent fury.

'You've betrayed me . . . trapped me . . .' she breathed.

'Think of it as a betrayal of your plans, but an affirmation of my love for you. You should be *flattered*, damn you!'

But all Samantha did was laugh.

It was not Samantha's laugh. It was a deep sound, from the back of her throat, a peculiar, animalistic noise that sent curiously uneasy shivers down Peter's back. He noticed a slight darkening of her skin. Her face seemed to harden slightly, and the shape of her eyes changed. It was a transient flicker of motion, and then Samantha was there again, pushing the sheet from her body and slowly standing. For that moment, however, Samantha's face had been touched with the sadistic features of Daniel, and the look that Daniel had given him was pure, undisguised hatred.

Samantha walked slowly towards him, and Peter could not help staring at her magnificent body. She looked so full, so lithe, so smooth . . . so inviting. As always, the sight of her in all her naked splendour made him instantly aroused. He tugged at his belt and loosened it, his mind reeling with images of the sexual encounter that would soon occur.

But there *was* something wrong, something about Samantha that made him nervous, now, so that he backed away from her. He reached round to touch the protective scar on his shoulder. He was shocked when Samantha mocked him with her laughter, then spoke in a deeper voice than her own, a voice which almost trembled with malevolent undertones. 'You've trapped me. You've trapped me and you expect that . . . that *scribble* to protect you?'

'It's protected me so far,' he said, on the defensive now. Samantha was very close to him. The skin of her face was strange, raised up into tiny little pimples. As he looked closely he could see the first hints of the shadow of a beard. Her breath in his nostrils was foul! He turned his head slightly, suddenly quite frightened.

'It has protected you,' Samantha said, 'because I *allowed* it to do so. Andrew couldn't control the forces he raised . . . and if *he* couldn't, what on this Earth makes you think that *you* could do any *better?*'

'Watch me . . .' he stuttered, a last gesture of self-control. She raised a hand towards him. Without touching him he felt his face slapped, hard on each side. A moment later he was flung bodily across the room, stumbling at the metal frame of the bed and falling to the floor. When he turned, Samantha was standing over him, her legs braced apart, her skin slick with moisture.

She was holding a burning match in one hand and a wooden hairbrush in the other. Looking down at him, she grinned, then applied match to wood. It took a moment for the oiled wood to catch, but then it began to smoke and smoulder, and suddenly burst into flame, burning fiercely.

'What are you doing . . .?' Peter gasped. His whole body felt as if it was being gripped by powerful hands.

'Now to see about your *protection* . . .' Samantha said

leeringly. She stretched her free hand towards him and wriggled her fingers. Peter found himself sitting bolt upright. He struggled and twisted, but couldn't move. She took his head by the hair, got a firm and painful grip on him, and pushed his face into her groin, where he choked on the moist, musky scent of the woman. He tried to move his arms but nothing happened. He tried to cry out, but as he opened his mouth the perfume of her sex, and the memories of the previous day's eroticism silenced him. Like a drug, the oil of her body made him placid, like an animal before slaughter, and made him ready for sex . . .

Samantha was waiting for the brush to become a burning mass of wood and bristles. She was saying, 'What do you know about what we are really like? Nothing. Nothing at all . . . You imagine that because we look familiar sometimes, we *are* familiar. Typical human stupidity . . .'

Peter found he could move his arms. But all he could do was reach up and grasp Samantha's thighs, then her buttocks, pulling himself deeper into her warmth. His fingers clawed and squeezed at her flesh, the desperate motions of sex made like the uncontrolled twitchings of a dying animal.

Then he felt the flat of the brush being pressed to his back, where Andrew's knife-made scar was. He heard the nylon of his shirt sizzle as it melted, then felt the searing pain as his flesh was burned.

He opened his mouth wider to scream, but no sound came. He pulled Samantha closer, filled his mouth with her hot flesh, let his agony happen in a silent, sensuously indulged minute of tasting . . .

The burning stopped, but the pain remained. Peter felt tears fill his eyes. He was completely helpless and now desperately frightened. Samantha jerked his head back, and looked down at him pityingly, bending low so that her breasts brushed his tear-stained cheeks.

And for a moment the masculine leering of Daniel that coexisted in her features faded, and Samantha was there, sad-eyed, gentle . . .

'Peter, I'm sorry . . .' she murmured.

'For God's sake . . .' he said weakly. 'What are you doing to me?'

In a deeper growl she said, mockingly, 'How about your protection now, Peter?'

The room began to sway around him. He knew he was on the verge of fainting and being sick. Samantha's body in front of him seemed to writhe and distort, as if he was watching her through rippling water. She lifted him easily. He felt his limbs go weak, and his body leave the ground. She was holding him in two hands, as easily as a child holds a doll. Her gaze was evil and sneering . . .

With a single, violent motion she flung him away. He crashed to the floor on his back, and lay helplessly. She stepped over to him. Her legs were covered with fine black hairs, her muscles were pronounced and hard. Her breathing rasped deeply in her throat, and her laugh as she reached for his trousers and ripped them, shredded them from his body, was the laugh of a man . . .

Naked, he could only watch as the succubus stretched and sucked him into painful over-readiness. Samantha squatted over him, then, and placed both hands on his mouth, blocking out his cry of agony as she pushed herself onto him and began to rape him . . .

Mary listened from the other side of the door, sobbing silently, stifling all sound. Her mind was a confused stew of emotions: shock, and betrayal, and anger . . . and mostly: fear.

Peter had lied to her. Far from destroying Andrew's papers, as he had promised, he had spent the night duplicating de-Solla's terrible work, because he could not stand to lose Samantha!

That was the worst part of it: that he had seemed to choose her, Mary, but had been scheming all along to have Samantha instead. The betrayal hit her with the force of a blow to the stomach.

The angry murmuring of voices from within the room had stopped. Mary knew that Samantha was attacking Peter in some way, but she didn't have the courage to open the door and help. Part of her – the angry, bitter part – said serve him right: it's what he deserves. But another part was fearful of the demon, fearful for her cousin's safety.

Inside, the bedroom had gone strangely quiet.

Slowly she pushed open the door. She opened it just enough so that she could see through the crack. What she saw there made her gasp with shock, a sound she stifled with her hand. She began to shake, screwing up her eyes as if trying to blind herself to the scene on the floor of the room, but fixated by what was happening, unable to wrench her gaze away . . .

Samantha's full, beautiful body was crouched over Peter's supine form, moving rapidly and forcibly upon him, while with her hands she scratched at his breast, and neck, and cheeks and thighs, so that his whole body was streaked with brilliant, running crimson.

As Mary watched, so Samantha's movements became more frantic, and the sound of her body impacting with Peter's became louder. Suddenly, all movement stopped. Samantha flung her head back and uttered a long, painful screech, a combination of release and pain . .

She remained in this awkward position for some seconds after the sound of her voice had died away, then slowly she straightened, slowly she stood, still straddling the panting, bleeding form of the man below her.

And she laughed.

What happened next made Mary give herself away by pushing the door wider open in her moment's shock. Even though she had seen the bizarre transformation between male and female form, downstairs, in the cellar, she was not prepared for the image of the *naked* body of Samantha slowly writhing and twisting into the hard, dark shape of Daniel . . .

The hair sprouted on its body, spreading down the legs and the arms like a flood of dark liquid. The arm muscles billowed and flexed, the veins standing out in taut knots; the creature's buttocks flattened; its breasts drooped then swiftly withdrew into a chest that swelled more muscularly. Samantha's soft facial lines became hard, the nose changed, the hair shortened, and became fairer, the skin darkened as a dense stubble appeared And finally, from between the rigid thighs, the creature's member began to probe into existence, a strange dark snake that curved out from the dark hair of the belly, twisted and turned like a trapped creature, then thickened and

rose, a long, darkly scaled limb that quivered and gleamed like a reptile.

Daniel turned and looked at the door, and he was smiling. His face was an evil, threatenig mask. He leered at her. Mary wanted to turn and flee, but his eyes locked with hers through the crack in the door and she found herself compelled to step inside the room.

Those eyes, those extraordinary violet eyes, caught her and drew her towards him . . . she was acting against her will, and hardly had the mental strength even to feel panic.

'Now it's your turn,' Daniel whispered as he smiled in triumph. He cradled his penis in his hand, bending it towards her so that she could see the glistening dew drop on the great swollen head.

Mary took another step towards him.

On the floor, Peter moaned and shifted, and his hands flapped feebly at the gashes and grazes on his body. He turned his head and saw what was happening, and he found the strength to gasp, 'Run! For God's sake, Mary. Run! Get out of here!'

Daniel seemed to loom over her. She could smell him, the sharp smell of sweat, and the musky smell of his erection. His eyes held her like a snake's. 'Lie down . . .' he hissed. 'Lie down quickly . . .'

'*Mary!*' Peter screamed, and his voice penetrated the spell. She gasped, took a step back, and glanced at her cousin. His hair was dishevelled and looked grey. His eyes were bloodshot, his face an aged mask. His appearance terrified Mary. His voice alerted her. She stared back at Daniel, and saw the fury in him, and the sadism, and the approaching moment of her violation.

She turned, screaming, and ran. His hand raked out and caught her hair. She struggled. Hairs came out by the roots. His hand was on her shoulder, tearing her blouse away.

Panic, desperation: wonderful weapons . . . she twisted out of his grip and ran for the door. She dragged it shut behind her, and punched at his arm as it groped into the corridor. She held the door with all her strength. Daniel withdrew his arm and the door slammed shut, but on the other side he began to wrench at the handle.

Mary grasped the handle and leaned back, sobbing loudly as

she tried to prevent the incubus from opening the door and reaching her.

Twice Daniel dragged at the door, almost jerking Mary off her feet.

Then there was a moment's silence, a moment's stillness, before he punched through the wood panelling and leered at her again.

Mary screamed. She let go of the door, turned to the stairs and began to run for her life . . .

He caught up with her in the garden. She was huddled behind a stand of bamboo, where she had fallen after twisting her ankle. She heard his slow approach and scrabbled at the ground, desperately seeking cover. But he stepped above her, a dark, naked shape against the lowering sky. A fresh, cold wind blew, and there was rain in the air, an approaching storm. Mary looked up and screamed, terrified by the grinning figure that towered over her. She twisted away, burying her face in her arms.

Daniel was breathing hoarsely as he reached down and with a single savage motion ripped away her blouse.

'Blame your cousin,' he whispered; and laughed. Mary huddled tighter, her skin goose-pimpled with the chill. Her voice was a series of agonized sobs.

Daniel reached for her again.

But the terrible touch of his fingers on her flesh never came. Mary forced herself to look up at him again, and what she saw gave her the courage to wriggle back from where she had fallen, grabbing at the torn tatters of her blouse. She wanted to cry for help, but all that emerged from her lips was a distraught whimpering.

Daniel seemed frozen, as if struggling within himself to move. As Mary watched him, so his face took on the features of Samantha, softer, prettier . . .

But then Daniel's hard, evil look was back. He tried to move, but succeeded only in trembling and twisting round slightly, his hand still reached out, the fingers curled, ready to grasp his victim.

Mary understood – or thought she did. The Samantha part of

the demon was holding him back, trying to exert control, even though she was much subdued. Climbing to her feet, Mary tried to dress herself, but she was shaking too much. Cold rain began to drench her, making mellow sounds on the dense undergrowth of this part of the garden.

She had to get away. She had to escape, to hide Daniel began to make a sound. He managed to turn his head, fixing Mary with his stare. The skin on his body darkened suddenly, and Mary realized that hair was suddenly sprouting from his flesh. His face twisted, became a gaunt, leering mask. His hair spiked up, his muscles thickened, became distorted, like some hideous mythological beast.

She ran frantically into the cover of the trees. The rain whispered on the leaves above her head. She had to hide. Anywhere, anywhere to avoid the fate that Daniel had in mind for her.

Behind her there was a sudden scream, of pain, she thought, or perhaps frustration She glanced quickly back . . .

Daniel was no longer in sight. Her heart missed a beat. Then something moved in the shadows, a slow, menacing approach through the woodland.

She turned again, and ran into the deeper wood. She wanted to scream, but all she could think of was *hide. Find somewhere and hide!*

Chapter Fourteen

Peter was lying in a field, behind a hedge. Andrew deSolla was by his side, as usual. The other boys' footfalls receded in the distance, beyond the hedge, and Peter turned to offer a cigarette. DeSolla was standing over him suddenly, his face haggard and old. 'One in spirit, in blood and in destiny,' he intoned, and drew out a samurai sword which he swished menacingly through the air. 'Now *we'll see about your* protection,' *he said, his face twisting into a leer. Peter was on his feet and running, with deSolla in close pursuit. They soon caught and outdistanced the other children. Peter turned off the road and ran up to a deserted old red-brick Victorian house. As deSolla closed on him, he smashed a window and climbed inside. The room he found himself in was cold and damp. An old blind man stood in the corner, watching him. As he ran into the hall, Peter heard the sound of splintering wood as deSolla cut through the door with his sword. He hastened up the stairs, and into an underground room: a library, panelled in dark mahogany. The door of a cupboard stood ajar. Peter walked across and opened it. Inside, several heads stood on shelves, each of them impaled through the eyes. He recognized Gabrielle Danton, Trevithick, and Mr Kilworth, the sixth-form chemistry master. A strange instrument like a burnished, razor-sharp tuning fork lay on one of the shelves, and he snatched it up as he heard movement behind him. DeSolla was there, dressed all in white. His violet eyes drilled into Peter. He raised the sword, Peter lunged forward, and they struggled, but somehow the blade sliced into Peter's shoulder, causing an agonizing pain. He raised the fork and drove it into deSolla's face, and his adversary fell to the floor with a groan, his outline becoming blurred and uncertain. When Peter looked again, he saw that it was not deSolla he had killed,*

but Mary. He dropped to her side, but the pain in his shoulder was making him dizzy; everything was spinning, round and round and round . . .

It was raining. The room was in semi-darkness. The sound of the rain against the window was loud and discomforting. The panes of glass rattled in the wind.

As he opened his eyes, Peter turned slightly to stare at the grey skies, the coming storm. It was late in the afternoon. He had been unconscious for an hour or more . .

And the pain was incredible!

He eased himself up, sitting with difficulty, reaching round to touch tentatively the swollen, blistered area of his shoulder. He cried out as even his gentle finger stroke sent a renewed wave of agony through his torso.

Gradually, the dream images fled; slowly, the memories of the real attack came back. Samantha's anger, her violence, the burning of the protective symbol, the savage attack upon him . .

And there was one final memory –

Mary, venturing tentatively into the room, her face pale and shocked, advancing towards Daniel, the demon, the transformed creature which was calling her.

He had shouted a warning. He had seen the look of sudden terror in her eyes. And then there had been black oblivion.

What had happened to Mary?

He struggled to his feet, wincing and crying out in pain. He staggered to the dressing table and searched through the tubes and bottles there, Samantha's disguise as a fully human woman. He found cold cream and smeared as much of the cooling ointment onto his blistered flesh as he could bear. His hands were shaking, his head was heavy, but a sudden terrible fear was driving him forward, now; fear for Mary, for what Daniel had in mind for her . . . and for her life.

As he ran down the stairs, calling for her, desperately hoping that she was hiding somewhere in the house, still safe from the demon's brutal attentions, as he made his way outside he felt only disgust with himself, a self loathing that sickened him to his stomach. How could he have been such a fool? How could he have been so weak?

Last night, when he had been reading Andrew's papers, he had become obsessed with the idea that he could have *everything* he wanted: he could keep Samantha, tied to the earth, tied to him, available to him at all times and without danger . . and he could have Mary, for love, for affection. Lovely Mary, the girl who deep down meant more to him than anyone. He could be in control. He could manipulate lives and destinies as easily as . . . as a sorcerer.

As Andrew deSolla had manipulated lives.

But Andrew hadn't been in control at all. It had all been illusion, the illusion of pleasure masking the reality of impending death. It was as if the very *act* of using occult power made the user overreach himself As if the power was itself probing for the user's weaknesses, and ultimately taking advantage of them.

Andrew had been a fool, a dangerous fool. Peter was a fool as well, but hardly dangerous. All he had managed to do was anger an entity that would now exact an awful vengeance on the person that Peter loved most.

Again he shouted for Mary. The house was silent, save for the drum of rain upon the glass skylight above the front door. Peter flung that door wide, now, and ran quickly out into the downpour, standing on the steps for a moment and searching the chaos of saturated nature for a sign of his cousin.

There was a man standing in the shadow of a tree. Peter peered hard at him, thinking at first that it was the priest He took a few steps down the garden and the man moved too, coming out into the grey light.

Unnerved, and now apprehensive, Peter realized that this was the blind man whom he had seen in the house on the east cliffs. Dressed in a black suit, with no shirt underneath the jacket, he looked a strange and threatening sight. He wore dark glasses, and his greying hair was slick with rain. Tall, slightly stooped, he seemed to be watching Peter.

'Who are you?' Peter called, and the man jerked slightly, as if tuning himself in finally to Peter's position.

'My name is William Hobson,' he said. His deep, mournful voice was an eerie sound in the pounding rain.

'What do you want?'

'What do you imagine that I want, Mr Conway?'

The rain was cold and painful on Peter's skin. He came close to the blind man, blinking the water from his eyes. Thunder growled distantly, and the wind shifted, so that the branches of the surrounding trees whipped and waved, and filled the air with glimmering threads of water. Ignoring Hobson's rhetorical question, Peter said, 'Have you seen a girl . . .?'

He immediately bit his tongue, an involuntary gesture as the futility of his request dawned on him suddenly.

'What I meant was . . . have you heard a girl. My cousin, Mary. How long have you been standing there?'

'I have heard no one,' Hobson said. 'I have been here for some minutes, watching and waiting. The time is now. The time has come. The time to confront the evil . . .'

In silence, arms wrapped around him, water pouring from his nose and eyelids, Peter stared at the calm old man before him. He hardly knew what to think. He was confused, he was frightened, but he was resigned to never quite knowing what was going on. The blind man kept his dark-eyed gaze upon him; his lips were drawn back in the merest, coldest of smiles.

'What evil would that be?' Peter asked through the rain.

'The Demon,' Hobson said. 'The Demon that has had you under its evil influence. The Demon that controls you, Mr Conway.'

'What are you, then? A priest?'

Hobson laughed. 'A priest? No. I am a hunter, Mr Conway. I have been a hunter for many years. I have met this demon's kind before, and have destroyed them, obliterated them from the earthly place. This is my work. A hunter of evil. This task is the last that I shall perform. My time is near to an end, but at last I have come to the place of power. This is a place I have sought for many years. When I arrived in Penthor I was unaware of the fact, but now I know. This is the old place, the first place. I should have known that it would have overlooked the sea. They cannot be attacked from the sea. They are always open in that direction . . .'

As he spoke, as he uttered the stiff, rehearsed words, so Hobson took slow, steady steps towards Peter. Malevolence shrouded the man like a dark cloak. He was as menacing, as

threatening, as Daniel had been, and Peter felt frightened. He stepped back a little, and the nervous movement made the demon-hunter stop.

'Where has it gone?' Hobson asked.

'I don't know. It's somewhere near . . .'

'In what form, Mr Conway?'

'In the male form,' Peter said. 'It's searching for Mary. I don't need to tell you what it has in mind.'

Through the rain, Hobson shook his head, as if agreeing, or perhaps sympathizing. He said, 'Whose seed does it carry, Mr Conway?'

Peter hesitated, then shrank a little into his own embrace, before he said, 'Mine. It carries mine.'

'Then you are lost,' Hobson murmured. When Peter glanced up quickly, the blind man said, 'But your cousin . . . the girl . . . there is still a chance that she may be saved . . .'

'What do you mean: I'm lost? What does that mean?'

'Who summoned the succubus?' Hobson asked coldly.

'Not me!'

'Who then?'

'The man who lived here before. Andrew deSolla. He summoned it. I merely used it.'

Hobson laughed. His lips glistened in the streaming water on his face. The day grew darker, the storm more intense. 'To use it is to be lost. You are a lost cause, Mr Conway. A lost life.'

'I just want to leave, now,' Peter said. 'I want to find Mary. And get out of here as fast as possible. Surely that's possible . . .?'

Hobson closed on him. Peter felt his legs shaking. He stared at the black of the lenses of the man's glasses, he smelled the sourness of Hobson's breath, he watched the storm water soaking the man's suit, and his skin, making the bare flesh of his chest pucker and pale.

'This place is an ancient place,' Hobson said. 'But I have not heard of Andrew deSolla. Who was here before him?'

'Carlyle,' Peter whispered. 'A man called Geoffrey Carlyle . . .'

And Hobson gasped, then smiled. 'I knew it . . .' he breathed. 'I should have known it all along. The Enneas . . . this is the place. The Enneas was here . . .'

Andrew's notes had mentioned the Enneas.

'The Nine,' Peter said 'A group of medieval sorcerers. That's all I know . . .'

Hobson laughed. 'Then you know precious little, Mr Conway. Precious little indeed. But you are right to be concerned. Your cousin Mary is in very great danger. We must find her. Together. *Now!*'

Peter turned, stared at the gardens, at the encroaching woods, at the house. He was half blind with the rain that sleeted and gusted against him. The wind howled. The whole landscape shifted and shuddered in the storm. Where did they begin? *Where?*

Hobson said, 'I'll search the house. You search the gardens. Drive it back to the house if you find it . . .'

'It?'

'The *incubus*, you fool! The male demon.'

'Of course.' Peter hesitated, watching the dark-suited man walk sombrely towards the front door of Sele House. 'But *how* do I drive it? What do I do?'

Hobson turned on him. 'What is the earthly name of the *succubus?*'

'Samantha. Samantha deSolla.'

'Appeal to Samantha. She can be saved. Appeal to the female aspect of the demon . . . you'll know what to do!'

Hobson walked away. Against the whine of wind and rain, Peter thought he heard a cry, a woman's cry, and he glanced back at the tangled garden.

As he began to run into the undergrowth, he was aware of the tiny form of a girl, watching him from the same shadows where Hobson had earlier been standing. When he stopped, peering through the rain at the child, she suddenly ran across the soaked lawn, following her guardian towards the house.

Where would she have gone? Where would she have run? Would she even have been *able* to outrun the athletic and youthful incubus? Perhaps, even now, Mary was lying dead somewhere, dragged behind bushes or tangled undergrowth, abused, violated and murdered . . .

But Peter remembered Mary's vitality, her natural instinct

for survival, for competition. She was not exactly unfit; she was lean and athletic herself. She was probably a match for the demon, which was weakened by its own internal conflict.

Peter shouted her name, but all sound was swallowed by the rain and the wind. He fought his way through the bracken and briar that choked the garden, and had to wipe the water continually from his face in order to see through the downpour.

At last he came to the place, by the stand of bamboo, where he had first seen Samantha. He walked into the clearing, his eyes focusing upon a fragment of white on the ground. When he picked it up he knew immediately, despite its fragmentary state, that it was a tear from Mary's blouse.

He felt sick. He clutched the piece of nylon and closed his eyes, pressing the fabric against his lips.

Dear God, don't let it be . . . don't let it mean what I think . . .

The shrubbery was broken and trampled in the direction of the tangled woodland that bordered the garden. He walked stiffly towards this place, peered into the darkness, then plunged on in.

She was lost. She was utterly and completely lost. She crouched, desperate, in pain, and in fear. There was nothing around her but primeval woodland. There were scarred trees, and gnarled branches, and glistening, dripping vegetation, there were thorns that snagged, and creepers that quivered, and brambles that scratched her ankles and her arms; there was shade and shadow, rank glade and rustling thicket. Everything around her gleamed and glistened in the last, grey light of the day.

And the rain poured through the canopy, rushing and hissing, splashing and soaking.

Mary cowered and cried, and tried to penetrate the thousand sounds of nature for the single sound of her pursuer.

After a while a branch cracked, somewhere to her right. She peered into the greenery. A dark shape moved there. She heard the sound of a man's breathing. The man hesitated, then crouched, then stealthily approached. She could smell him. Sweat, violence . . . the smells of terror . . . She slowly stood . . .

A moment later she was running again. Running for her life.

He always knew where to look; and a few minutes after entering Sele House, William Hobson had found the entrance to Andrew deSolla's workshop. He led the way down the steep stairs, Karianna following.

Karianna stood at the edge of the wide, gloomy room, shivering with cold, still soaked from the rain. She kept brushing her hair back from her face, and sniffing loudly. She watched Hobson as he stalked around the chamber, picking up objects, containers, books and instruments.

'What did you mean?' she said. And added, 'What did you mean *this is your last encounter?*'

Hobson scowled. He was staring at the grimoire, running his fingers down the closely inscribed page. He seemed satisfied, delighted.

He said, 'I did not use those words. I said that this would be the last task which I would perform.'

Karianna shuddered. She watched as the blind man continued to read. His fingers touched the words. His dark glasses glintered by candle-light. He was not reading, he was sensing the power in the inscriptions. The room ached with power; it was everywhere. Even Karianna could feel it. The table was centuries old. The retorts seemed to sing. The books shifted restlessly on the shelves. You did not have to have the power of sight to be aware of the occult wealth in this place.

The room moaned its magic life.

'What do you mean, then?' she insisted. 'Why the last task? What happens next?'

He stared sightlessly at her, then favoured her with the thinnest of smiles. 'Come here. Come here, child. Come to me. Now.'

She hesitated, then walked gingerly across the cold room towards him. When she reached the heavy wood desk she stopped. Hobson stepped round, feeling his way carefully, and when his hand rested on her shoulder he dropped to a crouch before her. His voice was soft, his tone urgent.

'Karianna, listen to me . . . listen to me, child . . .'

'I'm listening,' she said irritably.

His grip on her shoulder tightened. 'I am an old man. I am finished. The quest is finished . . . or will be. This place is the beginning place for so much of the evil which we have encountered, you and I. When it is destroyed the task will be so much easier.'

'Whose task?' the girl asked nervously

'Your task,' Hobson said, squeezing her flesh, trying to shake some strength into her. 'I am tired, Karianna. Very tired. The encounter with this demon will tire me more. When it is done, I shall prepare you. And you will be alone, then, alone in the world, but powerful. Oh my dear girl, what power you shall inherit from me . . . you will be the final hunter. You will end the hold of the Enneas for ever. You will clean the last of their muck from the face of this country . . .'

She stared at him in the silence that followed, then asked, 'And how long will all that take?'

He laughed. He stood, towering above her, a lean, dark shape. 'It will take time. But when eventually you have peace, you will have real peace. I have been waiting to transfer the burden to you. You are young, child, but you are strong. I have confidence in you.' He bent close again. He smiled, he tried to kiss her, but she drew back. He frowned, but shrugged the gesture off. He said, 'When you are prepared, what power you will have. What you lose . . .' he glanced at her . . . 'what you lose will be more than adequately compensated for. What power, Karianna. The power to control. The power to seek. You are the best of apprentices.'

He walked away from her, stopping by the great clay furnace, feeling its contours, touching the metal tools that were propped beside it. He murmured, 'The thing will return here. It will have to return. We have the element of surprise.'

Karianna took a deep breath, watching the old man as he probed and explored, lost in his own thoughts. 'I'm not sure I want to be your apprentice,' she said.

'Nonsense,' Hobson retorted.

'I don't even know what the Enneas *are*,' she insisted. 'All I heard was that man, Conway, saying that they were the Nine. Nine men . . .'

'Not nine *men*,' Hobson corrected, still pottering.

'Nine sorcerers,' she amended, watching as he prowled into the greater gloom of the room's far end.

'More than that, even,' Hobson said. 'Far more.'

'What then?'

He turned on her suddenly, stepping back into the feeble light of the single candle that burned on the desk. For a long while he stood quite motionless, and Karianna began to shake. She had encountered this sort of mood before. It usually ended at the sort of beating she would prefer to forget. Hobson was angry.

Quickly she said, 'I just felt it was important for me to know, that's all.'

He shook his head slowly. 'The Enneas was evil. The Enneas *is* evil. Each century it is replaced. It is always more potent at the beginning of the century than at the end, which is why apprentices like the man who lived here come into their own, dabbling and meddling and causing chaos. The Enneas has always been. It has always existed. It is a power of terrifying breadth and scope, something that draws on magic and the mind, and the underworld . . . and it is weak, now, and we have found its lair. We can destroy it, and all its work. *You* will finish the job when I am gone.'

'But what *is* it. Who *are* they?'

'That knowledge, Karianna . . .' Hobson said, reaching for the candle, feeling for it by its warmth, 'will end with the destruction of this place. Of this book . . .' He set the flame to the manuscript pages, and they flared and crackled, burning quickly. The yellow light made Hobson seem hideous and ghoulish, as he stood, seemingly watching the destruction of the grimoire. 'It will end with my death. It will end with Conway's death, and his cousin's. When all are dead, the Enneas will be forgotten. A great terror will have gone from the world.'

'I still think you should tell me what the Enneas really *was*,' Karianna murmured, sulkily.

'Be glad that you have been spared the knowledge,' Hobson replied, as he came back towards her. 'Now. Help me prepare the trap . . .'

In the middle of the garden there was a high brick wall, overgrown with ivy and briar rose, there was a rusting iron gateway through the wall, and Mary squeezed through the slight gap, trying to avoid the knee-high nettles that gardened this secret landscape. The inner garden was a place of statues, ferns and wild vegetation, small trees grown to a man's height, stands of nettles and buckweed nearly as high as Mary herself. Among this chaos rose the gleaming white surfaces of marble figures. Distantly, a strangely welcoming sight, was a ruined summerhouse.

As she stared at the decaying building she became aware that someone was lurking within it She hugged the wall, crouching slightly, feeling panic beginning to flutter within her. She could hear no sound of pursuit. Equally, she could see no sign of someone having forced his way through the jungle of weeds that had swamped the inner garden

Then the figure came to the glassless window of the summerhouse, saw her and beckoned.

She huddled even lower, and began to prepare for escape, back the way she had come. But she waited, curious. The figure was a man. The man called.

'Mary . . . quickly, Mary . . . here . . for God's sake, quickly, before it finds you . . .'

'Peter . . .' she breathed, and the relief in her breast was like a physical shock.

Quickly she stood and peered back through the iron gate. She listened hard through the rain. She could hear someone moving about in the undergrowth. Glancing back at the summer-house she saw Peter again, standing by the door. He was beckoning frantically to her, and pointing to the right. She looked to where he was pointing and saw a pathway through the trees.

Escape. Safety.

'Quickly, Mary!' he shouted.

'I'm coming!' she called back, and plunged headlong through the nettles. She struggled through the tangled garden, pushing aside the towering statue of a cherub, and scrambled up the rain-sodden boards of the steps. Inside the summerhouse she nearly sobbed when Peter reached for her. She felt his

embrace. Rain, penetrating the broken roof slats, tickled her neck.

'God!' she said. 'I'm glad you're here.'

'Glad to have you,' Daniel said; and laughed as Mary began to scream.

Seconds after he heard the scream Peter reached the brick wall that had once guarded the secret inner garden of Sele House. The brick, and the tangled plant growth that had swamped it, were too slick to climb. Furious, increasingly anguished, he fought his way along its length, seeking a gateway.

It took him five minutes to find the rusting iron gate through which, although he was unaware of this fact, Mary had passed a while before. He saw the summer-house, and watched it through the rain, but his attention had been taken almost immediately by the sound of someone running back through the woodland, away from the garden, in the general direction of Sele House.

He gave pursuit.

He could soon see the scampering figure, and realized that it was a naked human form, with a heavy, muscular body, but long hair and a strangely awkward way of running. Not awkward, he realized, but a running style that he more generally associated with a woman: arms out, body held more upright than when a man moved.

When the fleeing figure stopped and glanced behind he felt a moment's awful shock.

It was Daniel's face, but the figure had breasts and a small, almost vestigial male genital appendage. It was neither Samantha nor Daniel. The demon was in the process of change . . .

Daniel had found Mary.

When he burst out onto the front lawn the succubus, Samantha, was waiting for him. She had regained her full form, now. She stood in the driving rain, a bedraggled, pale shape, watching him. He could hardly bring himself to approach her, but after a while he did. Samantha didn't move.

'Where is she?' Peter asked. 'Where's Mary?'

'In the summer-house,' Samantha said.

'Is she dead?'

And to his great joy the succubus shook its head. 'Daniel would have killed her, but I regained control of him. I couldn't stop . . .' The woman – the *demon* – looked almost upset. 'I couldn't prevent what happened.'

'Will she survive?'

'I don't know. Daniel was very brutal. He tricked her . . . made her believe it was you. I don't know, Peter. I don't know what will happen to her. You must look after her now.'

Peter nodded. He didn't know why, exactly. It was incongruous, standing in the rain with a beautiful naked woman, knowing that that exciting flesh concealed some dark force from a realm beyond his real understanding.

'I *have* to go,' Samantha said.

'I know. I shan't stop you.'

'What Andrew did to you was no real defence,' the succubus said. 'The mark. It merely gave *me* release from *my* needs, the demon needs. I could love you as . . .' Samantha laughed, ironically Peter thought. 'As one human with another. I was here too long. I became too human. The more human I became the less I could control the incubus. You have brought this tragedy upon yourself, Peter. But if I can go now, so can you. You and Mary. Daniel is done with her. The incubus is quiet.' Quickly, then, Samantha stepped foward. Peter stiffened, backed away a little, but the woman reached out, took his shoulders, pulled him towards her.

'I shall miss you, Peter . . .'

He didn't know what to say. After the briefest of pauses, Samantha kissed his lips. She laughed as the rain ran down their faces. She kissed him again, then pulled back, a frail, white shape in the cold, in the gloom. 'I did love you, Peter. I didn't think it possible . . . Think of me sometimes. Think of me in hell . . .'

And with that she turned and ran towards the house. Peter wondered what he should do. He glanced back towards the overgrown garden, his thoughts on Mary . .

And then he remembered Hobson. 'Samantha! Wait . . don't go into the house!'

Too late. She was through the door. He raced after her. 'Samantha!'

Inside the house he could smell burning, a peculiar, sharp odour, like paper, but with a bitter chemical aroma overlaying it. He heard the hatch to the secret workshop banging slightly, and ran quickly through the house, into the narrow corridor that led to the old scullery.

He just glimpsed Samantha's head as she climbed down the steps.

A moment later she cried out, and Peter heard Hobson's shout of triumph.

When Peter climbed down the steps he saw immediately that it was too late. Samantha was trapped inside a bright red circle, painted on the floor. The circle was just four feet across. She twisted this way and that, trying to push across what was obviously a barrier to her, but to no avail.

The little girl, Karianna, was standing close to Peter. He caught her eye, saw the little smile on her face.

'You'd better run,' she whispered. 'He'll get you next.'

Too stunned for a moment to react or think clearly, Peter suddenly shouted, 'Don't kill her!'

Hobson stood beside the circle, within arm's reach of the frantic demon. In his hand he held a long-bladed knife, a hideous, curved thing, brilliant silver in the light of several candles.

'So, monster. Now we shall see who shall destroy whom . . .'

'Wait!' Peter said, but Hobson turned on him, furious.

'Silence! I have sought this place and this beast for too long to wait. Come here, Mr Conway. Watch as I put an end to your handiwork . . .'

And before Peter could speak again, or make a move, he had plunged the knife into Samantha's abdomen.

'No!' Peter screamed.

Samantha closed her eyes and rocked back and forth in the enclosing circle. Hobson kept his hands on the black handle of the knife and twisted it viciously. Samantha just stood, as if paralysed, and let this awful deed be done. Bright blood spurted from the wound, drenching her legs, and Hobson's arms.

Hobson shouted, 'I, William Hobson, send thee, demon, into the eternal dark!'

And as he said those words, Samantha's eyes opened for the last time. She uttered a piercing, awful wail, a sound like that of no earthly creature, that rose to fill the cramped chamber. Her last glance was one of such terrible pity that Peter almost wept; and she glanced at *him*, and in her eyes there were tears.

Then Daniel's face appeared there, a savage mask of twisted anger, a cruel vision, then there was another face, and another. And all of them looked at Peter, and the wailing scream continued.

However Hobson had done it, he had done for the succubus Trapped when it was weak, Hobson himself had found the strength to penetrate Samantha's psychic defences around Sele House. Simple strength had triumphed. Power had subdued power. The contest had been won by the hunter, as he had bragged that it would be won.

Peter turned back to the steps and began to climb them. Behind him Hobson shouted, 'Where do you think you're going, Mr Conway . . .?'

As he glanced back, Peter saw Hobson jerk the knife from the demon's body. The pale human shape immediately became engulfed with flames, and collapsed to the floor, twitching and threshing as dark entrails burst and bubbled from its opened body.

Hobson drew back his arm and made a motion almost too fast for Peter to see. But he saw the glint of the blade as it streaked through the air towards his heart, and with a cry of alarm he twisted on the steep steps The knife thudded into the wood, an inch from his hand.

He waited about no longer. He fairly dragged himself up to the house, and slammed the trap-door shut. Even as he did so Hobson, eyes exposed and staring emptily towards him, was beginning to climb.

Peter fled from the house into the driving rain.

Which way to go? Which way to safety? Pursued by a sightless man, he felt in more danger than if the police were after him.

He ran towards the road, towards the cliffs . . .

William Hobson had little difficulty following Peter Conway Not only did he make a lot of noise as he crashed through the wet undergrowth, but also the stink of evil was fresh and powerful upon him.

Hobson felt a tremor of anticipation as he thought of putting an end to the man, and then his cousin; and with that, with the death of the Conways, he would have put an end to the whole cycle of evil here in Penthor.

He had found far more than he had expected: a network of occult practice that stretched back to before the presence of the Romans in Britain. So many hunters like he had spent their lives searching for the place where the Enneas underwent their cycle of life, death and transformation, so many searching and failing, and he had stumbled upon it in pursuit of a succubus!

Karianna must never know the full truth It was sufficient for her to know that the Enneas appeared as men, as magicians, who died in the eighth decade of every century, and who were guarded by apprentices – men like this Andrew deSolla, who had so obviously dabbled with the Secret Arts while his master slept – guarded until the new dawn of the new century, when the cycle of evil would start again.

It would all have to be destroyed. The house, the houses on the other cliffs, perhaps some of the town, those people whom the demon and the evil had tainted

After that, a speedy departure: people would not easily understand what he had done, and why he had had to do it They would see only bodies, and they would blame him. Blame him! For saving them from destruction.

As he moved steadily through the rain, listening to Peter Conway somewhere ahead of him, he felt a touch of bitterness at this irony. But he knew better than to expect gratitude.

He moved at a fast walk, not breaking into a run, but covering the ground equally as fast. Karianna trotted by his side. Now that all of this was over he would have to conclude rapidly the training of the girl, preparing her to be his successor. There would still be much to be done. She would be reluctant – as he had been reluctant when first he had had to confront the facts of his ancestry, and realised what it was

necessary for him to do to himself. But Karianna would see the necessity. He would *make* her see.

The smell of salt sea air grew stronger, and they emerged from the trees into the open clifftop area. There was a sense of great space in front of him, a sense which made it harder for him to find his bearings. The wind blew off the sea, driving the heavy rain straight into his face. He could still smell his quarry, though, even as the swirling wind made it hard for him to sense the direction.

Karianna ran ahead of him: he could hear her feet thudding into the soft turf. 'Which way?' he said, suddenly uncertain. 'Which way?'

Her voice came from ahead of him, and to his left. 'Over here. He's hiding over here.'

It seemed wrong: he would have guessed that Conway was over to his right. But Karianna's voice was insistent and she could see and he could not. He moved in the direction of her voice, knife raised, ready to strike.

'This way,' she called again. 'Over here. The path's good.'

He turned further to his left, walked on a few more steps.

'He's trapped,' Karianna said. 'You've got him. Just a few more steps.'

He walked on, puzzled. Conway's smell was still only faint. Then, halfway through a step, he heard Karianna again: a little giggle – from *behind* him.

How had she got there? An awful realization flooded through his mind and he tried to stop himself, but he was far too committed!

He had trusted her. He had known of her boredom, and her resentment, but he had always trusted her. It had never occurred to him to doubt . . .

'Karianna!' he screamed, as his foot came down on empty air. 'What have you done, child?'

As he cartwheeled out into empty space, Hobson let out a cry, more of anger than of fear. As the wind snatched his breath away the echoes of his scream gave him a picture of the sea, like an infinite wall, rushing up to meet him . . .

Peter stood by the cliff's edge, watching in fascination and horror as the little girl lured Hobson to his death. As the old man missed his footing and tumbled into space, he felt

physically sick . . . and at the same time deeply relieved, as if the last weight of oppression had been lifted from his neck.

It was all over, he said to himself. Now at last it was all over

The girl came walking slowly towards him, looking nervous, looking embarrassed, looking slightly sheepish. Then she brightened, standing close to Peter and staring up at him through the rain, wiping her lank hair from her eyes and smiling broadly. 'I'm Karianna,' she said. 'I hope we're going to be friends.'

Peter stared at her, then shifted his gaze to the part of the cliff where Hobson had met his end. Karianna looked back as well, then shrugged. 'He was going to blind me . . .'

'Blind you?'

She nodded solemnly. 'I was his assistant. He was old, and he was going to prepare me to follow in his footsteps. I've hated him for years.'

'You could have run away,' Peter murmured, still feeling sick at the thought of the casual way the girl had led Hobson on his last dance.

She shook her head. Her stare was a plain and plaintive one. She might have been pleading, in her silent way, for his understanding.

She said, 'I was his property. He killed my parents and made me his property. To do and to serve, and always to obey. Now I'm free of him. He's dead and I didn't even touch him.' She stepped closer to Peter, reached out and took his hand. He thought that she was crying, but her face was so wet with rain it was impossible to tell.

She said once more, *Please* be friends with me!'

Peter smiled. Of course I will. We must find Mary, now. And then get dry.'

As they walked away from the cliff, back towards the gate of Sele House, Karianna said pointedly, 'Not all of that spell book was burned. I can show you some tricks, if you like . . .'

Peter laughed. 'I don't think so. I think we should just get the hell out of here, and leave the place to rot.'

But as they walked back along the path he glanced down at the girl, looking very thoughtful.

Epilogue

Peter was working in his study when he heard the front door of the house bang open and the sound of Karianna running along the corridor. He looked up, slightly puzzled, his mind still full of the strange and complex facts which he'd been absorbing.

He heard Karianna fumbling with the trap-door, and a moment later it opened. The girl shouted. 'Quickly! Peter, quick! She's here!'

'Who's here?' he called back, slightly alarmed now.

'*Mary!* She's back! Hurry *up!*'

Confused, he stared stupidly at the crack of light at the top of the steps, then he mobilized himself into action, sweeping the papers and parchments from the desk into his wide briefcase, and flinging the case into its hidden niche, behind the wall-drape at the deepest end of the room.

He glanced at his watch, thinking that he must have been so absorbed in his work that he'd lost touch with time. But it was only eleven a.m. and Mary was not due to have been discharged from hospital until three that afternoon. He had been intending to be with her from midday.

He clambered up the steps, helped by Karianna, who again urged him to hurry. They locked the door, covered it with a piece of carpet, and then walked hurriedly to the front door of Sele House, arriving just as Mary entered, the tiny bundle that was Andrew Conway cradled in her arms. The taxi driver carried her case for her, then departed.

Mary beamed at Peter, proud – a proud mother.

'Mary,' he said. 'I was just about to leave for the hospital.'

'I got fed up with just sitting in bed, just because it was the hospital rule. So I discharged myself. Isn't he gorgeous?'

They gathered round the swathed infant. Andrew, just five

days old now, gurgled and sucked on nothing. His eyes were tightly closed, and his minute little fingers reached and touched, as if searching for something to grip hold of.

'He's beautiful,' Peter agreed. 'Takes after me, I think.'

'Nonsense,' Mary said. She was looking a little drawn. Her hair was quite grey, now, but had a sheen to it. Peter led her through to the kitchen, and they placed the baby on the table and peered some more, trying to get the little lad to open his eyes, or clutch at a pudgy adult finger.

'I haven't even started lunch,' Peter confessed.

'Don't worry,' Mary said. 'A cup of coffee would be lovely. Then, I thought, a walk into Penthor. Show our son the sights of Cornwall's most infamous town.'

As she sipped a strong cup of black coffee, Mary unwound, fully relaxed. She said, 'I *am* glad we decided to stay here.'

'Are you?' Peter asked.

She nodded. 'When I saw this little chap for the first time . . . when I held him, all the horror went away.' She looked up at Peter, who took her hand and squeezed it tightly 'He's *our* child, I suddenly realized. That thing . . . Daniel . . it was just an intermediary. It no longer mattered.'

'I'm so glad to hear that,' Peter whispered.

'The pain went,' Mary said. 'The visions, the discomfort All of it. Andrew is *our* child.'

'So am I,' said Karianna, coming round to hug Mary. Mary laughed, then kissed the girl. 'Of course you are.'

Standing behind her, Karianna glanced at Peter, the hint of a smile on her lips. Peter frowned at her, shaking his head minutely.

'I can smell smoke,' Mary said.

'I found some more of deSolla's papers. I'm burning them on the fire stack. I think the house is clean, now, but items still turn up, so we'd better keep the stack going.'

Mary shrugged. 'I don't care about that any more. As long as the evil is gone, as long as there's nothing left for people to tamper with, then we can live our lives happily. Can't we darling . . .' she added, leaning close to the infant Andrew, and tickling the tiny nose with her finger.

Peter and Karianna smiled dutifully in agreement.

'Oh look! At last!'

Andrew had opened his eyes. He peered up at the adults, his first glimpse of his new family.

'How *beautiful!*' Mary exclaimed, and picked the child up, holding him close to her.

Peter put his arm around Mary's shoulder.

'Violet eyes . . ' Mary whispered 'Beautiful, violet eyes . . .'

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SUCCUBUS

n. a fiend or devil who assumes female form, and in such guise consorts wickedly with the souls of sleeping men.

Uncanny things began to happen to Peter Conway almost as soon as he set foot in the remote Cornish village of Penthor. First there was the shipwreck, those two rotting corpses alongside the perfectly preserved body of the sea's third victim. Then there was the beautiful, mauve-eyed woman whom he had greedily watched making love on the cliff-top, her aura of erotic energy seemingly reaching out to flicker all around him. And there was the reunion with his old friend Andrew, long devoted to other-worldly pursuits, who in the few short years since he had last seen him had aged by a quarter-century or more.

Yes, he thought with a shudder, there was in Penthor an unmistakable sense of evil, spiced with the heady, musky scent of forbidden lusts and passions. And even as he pondered on what he had seen, Penthor's macabre miasma was sucking him in, enticing him deeper and deeper into a dark and fearsome mystery enshrouded in necromancy, terror and death . . .

Cover illustration by Kevin Tweddell

0 7221 3220 4 HORROR

UNITED KINGDOM £1.95

GB £ NET +00

ISBN 0-7221-32

KR-006-224

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